Eagle's Prayer: Part Two

VraieEsprit

Tenchi Muyo

Complete

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Eagle's Prayer: Part Two

VraieEsprit

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Summary

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Description

On Rikishouki at last, but Tokimi's past is haunting her, putting her in terrible danger as Yuzuha seeks to destroy the last of the Kii. Washu has taken the Miko's crown but can she really give up everything to be the Priestess Rikishouki needs?

Chapter 1

Introduction and Disclaimer

Part two cometh, and with it… more angst for Tokimi.

I'm feeling a little mean, actually, writing this story. She's become so sweet, somehow, I feel really bad getting her all upset. But hopefully it's all in a good cause. As with part one, this story is focused very much on Washu, Tokimi and their Kii ancestry/heritage. It's also likely to be the *last* Tenchi story I write for a bit — though I have two other particular ideas floating around, I'm not sure if or when I will consign them to digitalia. With Yuzuha and Mayuka used, I've run out of original Tenchi villains, and it's always best to quit while ahead ;) Though I'm in no way afraid of using OC characters or the challenge of integrating them into this continuity, I'd really rather not go too far along those lines if I can help it!!

As I said, if I get my head around the two vague ideas I have buzzing, then you'll see them uploaded also. But one at least will be different in a lot of ways, and may not be to everyone's taste. (There, don't say you weren't warned in advance…) And I won't make any guarantee of timescale… just watch this space :)
(Hopefully the ending of this fic won't drive too many people too crazy!!)

As ever, this story — like with all my others — operates on a **Tenchi Universe** foundation (not an OVA one). This means that any ideas included from other timelines/continuity are at my own discretion and characters imported are likewise open to my own interpretation. The butchered Jurai royal family still exists (although shall play no part in this tale, I think) and in other respects, all rules of time, law, age, space and communication are based *only* on what information is given us in **Tenchi Universe** (and it's subsequent movies) and my own developments on that theme.

Not much else to say about *this* story, except to spare you more of my inane ramblings about language!

Usual legal regs, etc ;)

Synopsis

Tenchi and his search party have reached the mysterious hidden planet

at last, but as they land, they realise that it bears a startling, disturbing resemblance to the lost planet Kihaku. Convinced she has returned to her homeworld, Tokimi is still fighting against her memories and in a fit of panic she heads off to find her sister, leaving Seiryo frantically trying to ensure her safety as Yuzuha seeks to rid the universe of the last of the Kii.

Meanwhile, Washu has been backed into accepting the coronet of being Rikishouki's revolutionary Priestess — but the decision may cost her her life, her friendships and the life she has created for herself on planet Earth. With her father's memory looming large in her mind, Washu knows she can't abandon her people a second time — but at what cost?

EAGLE'S PRAYER: PART TWO
A Tenchi Muyo! FANFICTION

By

VRAIEESPRIT

Chapter One
The Planet Kihaku
Several Milennia Earlier

The storms still raged around Kihaku.

As the rain pelted down around her, a solitary figure stood in the dimming light of the evening, gazing at her surroundings with impassive, empty eyes. People hurried in every direction, hastening to get to shelter before the lightning racked the sky once more, and nobody noticed the cloaked, huddled figure as she leant up against the trunk of a splintered tree.

To her eyes, this world was already a dead one. Trapped in the ritual of superstition and routine, it was cold to her and somehow she knew it always had been. In her desire to know all, and learn all, she had severed her bonds with this place and its native, heathen calling.

"I would have gone long ago, if I had known how." She murmured, turning her back on the harried villagers as she made her way purposefully down the hill towards the largest and most sturdy of the Settlers' many domes. "Perhaps I should have done, in hindsight. Perhaps I should have left Kihaku, when I told Tokimi I wasn't coming back home. Then, at least, I'd never have disappointed her. Or rather, I'd never have had to have seen her disappointment."

She faltered, glancing upwards as at length the thunder came, light splitting the sky and illuminating the earth as bright as daylight.

"This is the legacy of the Hakubi, to let anger rule and rule supreme."

She muttered. "Tokimi is my father's daughter more than I will ever be. We have parted ways forever now, my sister. You have made your choice, and I mine. I cannot stay on Kihaku — not now. This is no longer my home."

At this moment she reached the foot of the hill, approaching the wall of the domed structure with a mixture of caution and wary hesitation. There were guards at post all around the construction, and she frowned, narrowing her eyes as she gauged her chances of breaking in. Then, at length, she shook her head.

"I will not stoop to that. Not yet. Not until I've exhausted other methods." She murmured. "I need their goodwill — and I hope, their help. This world of theirs — this Jurai — I want to see it. It and many more places. Jurai has creations beyond my wildest imaginings, and I need to know more about the things that science can achieve. I've learnt a lot, from my own study, but it isn't enough. Not any more. I need to learn from these people — and for that, I need their trust."

"Where are you going, maiden?"

A guardsman barred her way, speaking in rough, badly pronounced Kii, and she stopped, meeting his hostile gaze with a level one of her own. She held up her hands, knowing that with her thick red hair swathed in fabric, there was nothing to distinguish her as a child of the Hakubi.

"I seek an audience with Lord Tennan, sir." She said, speaking slowly and carefully in the words of the Settler people. At her response, the man looked taken aback, staring at her with undisguised astonishment.

"You are a native, wench! Yet you speak the language of Jurai — how is this possible?"

"Appearances can be deceiving." The girl said simply. "I have forsaken this world and its suffocating ritual of superstition and myth. I wish to be of service to Lord Tennan and his people, in any way that I can."

The guard's eyes narrowed, and he seemed to be sizing her up, eying her carefully as she boldly met his gaze.

"How are you called?" He demanded abruptly. "It's no secret that my Lord Tennan has plans to leave Kihaku, and that he has extended his reach to taking with him any Kii native who can prove themselves worth his time and effort. He seeks to return to his Emperor within a few days — but I warn you, he is not an easy man to satisfy. He seeks only those who can provide him with information and service — and few of your people have even the basic skills to please a man of Jurai."

"I wish to see him anyway, if you don't mind." The woman said softly. "And they call me Washu, sir."

“Washu?”

“Yes.”

“Just Washu?”

“Just Washu.” Washu nodded her head. “Washu of Kihaku, if it so pleases you.”

The guard’s eyes narrowed, and he muttered something under his breath. Washu’s sharp ears caught the end of it, clenching her fists beneath her heavy cloak as she heard the words ’savage culture “. Her patience bore fruit, however, for he nodded his head, reaching out to take her abruptly by the arm.

“Then come with me to my Lord Tennan.” He said brusquely. “But be aware, Washu of Kihaku, that my master does not like his time being wasted. If you should not be of use to him…”

“I am willing to take that chance.” Washu said evenly. “I have nothing left here, after all. No family. No roots. No reason to stay on Kihaku.”

She spread her hands, running her finger absently over the space where she had once worn sacred rings denoting her tribe.

“No identity, either.” She added softly. “As you see, I bear no tribal insignia. I am one alone, sir. Therefore, I will take my chances with your honoured master — and hope that, in some small way, I might be of service to him.”

“Then follow me.” The man returned. “And keep up — the tunnels are long and winding and if you are found here alone, you will be killed on sight. You may not bear tribal rings, Washu of Kihaku, but you are still a native and your presence here without supervision may be misconstrued.”

Washu did not respond, instead turning to glance around her at the brightly lit hallways that led deeper and deeper into what her father had called enemy territory. At length they reached a larger door, and with a sharp instruction to “stay there”, the guard disappeared inside, presumably to speak to his master on a more direct basis. Now alone, Washu took the opportunity to absorb her surroundings in more detail, noting the many carvings of trees that lined the walls.

“Trees again. Always trees.” She murmured. “It sits so at odds with a world like this. The Tsunami-goddess they all believe in is almost as heathen and superstitious as my father’s faith in the Eagle of Kihaku. And yet… and yet…”

She faltered, taking in the bright, white-beam lights that lit the outer chamber, and she sighed.

"No torches in sconces." She acknowledged. "Technology and faith sit side by side on this world. Why could it not have been that way for us too, Father? You died because you sought to prevent it… why would you not trust these people, and learn from the things they know? They came to invade our world, true enough, but is it really invasion if they bring with them knowledge and techniques that might one day have benefited our people?"

"Woman, you may enter."

The guard's voice interrupted her musings at that juncture and she turned, offering him a respectful smile as she bowed her head.

"Yes, sir. Thank you. Your kindness is appreciated." She said softly. The guard eyed her for a moment, then pushed back the door, ushering her inside.

"Do not keep my Lord Tennan waiting, and do not waste his time." He said, in a voice which told her that it would not just be she who was punished, should she fail to impress. "My Lord is not enamoured of your people, Washu of Kihaku. You'd do well to remember that, when addressing him."

He gave her a little shove, and Washu found herself in an immense chamber, hung with tapestries and decorated with ornate, elegant carvings from floor to ceiling. On the floor a carpet of rich burgundy softened and warmed the room, and more of the white-beam lights encircled the rounded walls, gleaming as brightly as the midday sun. For a moment, Washu faltered, transfixed by this obvious statement of wealth and means. Then she gathered herself, turning her gaze instead on the figure that awaited her.

She moved forward, pausing a few feet from his seat and dropping to the floor, bowing her head in reverence towards him.

"You are the Kii?" The man's tones were soft and smooth, and Washu raised her head, nodding slowly.

"Yes, sir. I am."

"I see." The man looked thoughtful, and he extended a long, weather-beaten finger, gesturing for her to stand. She did so, and for a moment his eyes roved over her, their malachite depths filled with the same curiosity as though he were regarding an exotic zoo exhibit. Washu stood still, inwardly indignant at his arrogance, but she bit her lip, unwilling to let her sharp, unguarded tongue speak out and endanger her chances of making an ally of this man. Instead she took her chance to size up her companion also, her green eyes flickering and impassive as she registered what sort of a person

sat before her.

Senichi Tennan was in the latter stages of his life, and from the reading Washu had done, she knew that in Juraian years he was well towards the end of his second century. His curly hair, long, thick and with the sheen of health despite the whiteness of age was fastened back from his face in what Washu had heard termed a 'soldier's queue', and life and intelligence glittered in his teal gaze. Though he was elderly, Washu quickly surmised that there was nothing slow or senile about this man and that she had no doubt, should he wish to challenge or put an end to an opponent, his body would not let him down. He was robed in the finest of Juraian noble attire, an ornately engraved sword hilted at his waist, and Washu could make out the curves of the Tennan family crest on the buckle of his belt. This image she had seen before, on ships that had broken through Kihaku's atmosphere, and she knew that, back home on Jurai, Senichi was a rich, influential man with the ear of the Emperor. Such a man was not someone to cross, and Washu made another mental note to watch her tongue while in his presence. And yet, despite his obvious status and arrogance, somehow Washu sensed that there was more to this man than just military victory and the desire to conquer. Now, gazing at his wizened, lined face, she wondered how many of those lines had been caused by age and how many by worry — after all, she reasoned, why would one who had so ruthlessly pursued Kii domination for so long suddenly be interested in taking natives back with him, when he chose to leave?

"You are of what age, woman?" At length Senichi spoke, his words crisp and clear, and Washu jerked back to attention, offering the man a smile.

"Five and twenty summers, my Lord."

"Five and twenty." The man paused, rubbing his beard thoughtfully, then, "How is it you can speak our language?"

"I've striven to learn it, my Lord. That's all."

"The Kii study the words of Jurai in their classrooms, then?"

"No, sir. I fear we don't." Washu shook her head. "I took it upon myself to learn them, my Lord. Your planet — your culture — everything you have brought to Kihaku interests me. I've always known that there is a world outside this one, and your people have proven it to me. The ideas you have, the things you can do — I want so much to learn more about them. That is why I wanted to understand your language, my Lord Tennan. I wanted to know about Jurai, and learn from your developments."

"I see." Senichi's eyes narrowed, then, "You are unusual among your brethren, then. You would contradict the will of your own leader, in pursuit of these goals?"

"I already have done so, my Lord." Washu held up her hands, revealing once again her bare fingers. "I have abandoned my people, and turned my back on their ways. I do not wear the mark of my tribe, because I no longer have a tribe. My Lord, I have not been educated by Juraian experts nor have I had the benefit of seeing these scientific developments at first hand. But I am keen to learn, and I have studied hard in my own time. I know that you seek to take with you any Kii that you deem worthy of your time. I seek to prove to you that I am worthy of that time, Lord Tennan. In whatever way you require."

Senichi eyed her in surprise, and for a moment there was silence between them.

"Coming to Kihaku has marked the deaths of two of my masters already." He said quietly, his tones laced with a faint sadness. "It has also stolen from me the life of my Lady wife, since the harsh climate was too much for her to bear. I am returning to my homeland because I do not wish to follow her to death in this barren, heathen place. Your people are ill-suited to the advances and benefits of Jurai's overlordship, and they are not easily educated. I will pass the guardianship to a younger man, now, because my taste for this place has abandoned me over the passage of time. Your people… your people disgrace this world, woman. And yet, among their number I have found a few who have been able to look beyond the stranglehold of tradition and fear. Very few, true enough. But that there are some people on Kihaku who are capable of being more than tribal followers… this is why I have made my will known. Already those who travel with me have taken husbands or wives from the native folk, educating them and teaching them the way of Tsunami's people. Yet you come to me alone — unfettered, unattached, and with definite ideas beyond those your world decrees. You interest me, maiden. I confess, your words intrigue me."

"You flatter me, my Lord."

"No, I think you flatter me." Senichi's lips twitched with wry humour. "You may be that rare thing — a Kii with the requisite intelligence and dedication to overthrow her background and advance. That you would take it upon yourself to learn our language — and not only that, to speak it with confidence and clarity — that is a gesture worthy of Juraian recognition in itself."

He glanced at his hands, then,

"Many women in your position would seek other ways to entice a Lord's favour." He added frankly. "And I have no respect for the courtesan who only wishes to sell her body, without considering her mind. You've provided me with something I've not seen before. You are ***not*** *like your brethren —*

not at all. I would know your name."

"Washu, sir. My name is Washu."

"Washu?" Senichi's eyes widened, and he pursed his lips. "I see. And your tribe, Washu?"

"As I already told you, my Lord, I have turned my back on my tribe."

"Yes, I recall." Senichi's eyes glittered with something Washu could not quite interpret, then he smiled.

"So it comes to this, then." He murmured, more to himself than anything else. "That the Priest's own daughter seeks solace and freedom from her father's ideals, and a new life away from the restraints of her world."

Horror flashed across Washu's expression at this, and Senichi laughed, reaching across to pluck the shawl from around her head. Thick waves of red hair cascaded across the girl's shoulders, and Senichi nodded, seemingly satisfied by what he saw.

"Yes, you are her all right." He mused. "I met your father on several occasions, and you bear his likeness in your face. You are Washu of the Hakubi, or am I mistaken?"

Washu bit her lip, gazing up at him as she tried to assess his demeanour. Then she sighed, inclining her head slightly.

"I was. I am no more." She said frankly. "My sister Tokimi has taken my father's crown, and I do not wish it back again. I turned my back on this world before my Father died, Lord Tennan. I have never sought to inherit the burdens he wished to place on me."

"And you would truly abandon all you have grown up around, in order to further pursue the path of knowledge?" Senichi asked lightly. Washu nodded her head again, all trace of uncertainty gone as she considered his question.

"Without a second thought, my Lord." She agreed gravely. "I told you, I am Washu of the Hakubi no more. I have chosen my own path — and I have chosen this."

Senichi smiled, this time a genuine smile that lit up his features and he reached across to grasp her hand in his. He squeezed it for a moment, then released it, and Washu stared at him, uncomprehending.

"You shall have your wish, Washu." He said softly. "I will indeed take you home to Jurai with me. And in return, you can furnish me and mine with records about your people and their strange, savage culture. I must know more about these wild folk who seek to kill my Emperors and who

will spill their own blood recklessly in order to spread our own. I'm an old man — I've seen many campaigns, and taken many worlds in Jurai's name. But never have I experienced a planet such as this one — never have I seen such violent, vehement hatred rise up from the core of the very population."

"The core of Kihaku is the source of that vehemence, my Lord." Washu said simply. "So long as the Priest is angry, so will the World be. It is the way of Kihaku — it always has been so."

"And Jurai cannot subjugate this people by slaying its Priest?"

"No." Washu shook her head. "The World will always exist, whether or not there is a Priest or Priestess to tame it. Such is the fate of my tribe, to be bound to this place for the whole of our lifetime. Now you know why I so wish to escape it, Lord Tennan. No matter what you and your people do, no matter how hard you fight, you will never break the will of the World. More people — many more people will die so long as the World is upset."

She sighed.

"It may already be too late." She added. "Darkness has already fallen over Kihaku… anger already dominates its core. I seek to leave here, and soon, my Lord, because I don't want to be caught up in the aftermath of its self-destruction."

"You speak plainly." Senichi acknowledged. "Very well. I am an old man, it's true, but age brings experience and judgement, and I have never yet failed to judge someone else's character aright. I believe your words, Washu, and I will keep my word to you, if you keep yours to me."

"I will do whatever is required of me, my Lord." Washu bent her head. "But sir, if you would not speak of my true roots again…"

She faltered, then,

"I will be adjudged as my father was." She murmured. "And I don't wish to be caught in such a struggle with your people. My father's foolishness cost him his life… his resistance to change and education marked him down for death sooner or later. But I don't want to share his fate. So please, Lord Tennan, I will be Washu of the Priest's Tribe no longer. I am just another Kii — seeking service and refuge from the House of Jurai."

Senichi regarded her for a moment, then he got to his feet, nodding his head as he did so.

"It is agreed." He said gravely. "You will fly with us, when we leave Kihaku. But I cannot guarantee you anything once we reach Jurai. You

will have to make your own way there — regardless of whether you arrive on my ship or not."

"I would not seek any such help, Lord Tennan. I assure you, I intend to find my own path and do my own thing." Washu said soberly.

"Then there is nothing more to be said." Senichi spread his hands. "Go, tell my guard that you are to be found lodgings among the serving quarters. In three days, we shall leave, and I shall find you work aboard my ship, so as to conceal your true identity from those you travel with. You are the first of your tribe not to show me and my family hatred — and I shall show you the same respect. Hakubi you may be, Washu, but I shall not consider you a foe to the family Tennan. As a tribal princess, you have humbled yourself before me to ask for my assistance. As a man of honour, I cannot ignore such a gesture. But you may not find everyone is so willing to give trust to a Kii."

"I don't ask for it to be given. I will earn it, if need be." Washu said stolidly. "And I thank you for your kindness to me. I shall not consider the Tennan family an enemy of mine, either. I don't believe you came here to hurt my people, or that the slaying of my father was intended. Many people do things without ever seeing the paths those deeds map out for them. That is why I want to map my own path, now, while the chance exists. I would never have been a true Priestess of Kihaku. But you and your people have given me insight into something else I might be, if I work hard. And finally, maybe, I will find my own purpose — wherever in the universe it may be!"

Chapter 2

Chapter Two
The Planet Rikishouki
The Present Day

"This feels so strange."

Washu bit her lip, glancing at her reflection in the shiny black marble of Mayuka's chamber wall as she examined her appearance. A young woman stared back at her, no more than twenty five in appearance, but with a gravity and concern in her green eyes that told of long and hard experience. With a jolt, Washu recognised her father's expression in her own gaze, and it unnerved her a little to realise it.

"Almost as if I've finally accepted Father's burdens." She murmured.

"Washu-sama?"

Mayuka's voice from the doorway behind her jerked her from her reverie, and she turned, casting her young follower a smile.

"It seems surreal." She admitted. "After so long fighting this destiny — here I am. Robed like a Priestess of Kihaku, as if all those years had never passed at all."

"You're so pretty, Washu-sama." Mayuka dimpled, settling herself on the floor as she gazed up at her companion. "Having seen your Father's image, and having read in the texts about the Hakubi, I suppose I knew you would be. But you really are. I would have known, I think, that you were our Miko-sama. Even if I hadn't had the visions. True, you don't quite look… well, in my dream, you wore true Priestess robes, and you had the coronet of Kihaku on your head. But I can still see it in you, somehow. You still look like the woman I knew would come."

"I'm not sure how." Washu admitted, turning back to her reflection to study it more closely. She did, she acknowledged to herself, look very nearly the part of a Kii Priestess. The robes she wore had been secreted away by Tadashi from the storage chamber in which Yuzuha had consigned any useful artefacts from the dead tribal rulers before her, and the soft cream and white was accentuated by the red sash that gathered the robe at the waist. Mayuka's skilled fingers had

woven Washu's hair with beads and ribbon, in a style the scientist had not worn since she had been a small girl, and she touched a loose lock self-consciously, aware of how much she now resembled her tribal ancestors.

"Even to the red sash, you've managed to bring a dead tribe back to life." She murmured. "The faith of you two people, who never even set foot on Kihaku. And yet you both shame me, Mayuka. You shame me for how easily I shed my roots and my past all those years ago. The people here had belief in my coming since before you were even born. I'm almost sorry I didn't get here sooner."

"You're here now, that's what matters." Mayuka grinned. "And red seemed right. The Priest… in the painting, his sash is red."

"Red was the colour of the Hakubi." Washu agreed absently, fingering the silken fabric as she did so. "But where did you find something so fine?"

"Yuzuha likes red, too. She thinks it's a symbol of power, or maybe just of the blood she's spilled." Mayuka shrugged her shoulders. "Tadashi's been busy — but he's not alone. Washu-sama, we're not the only people on Rikishouki who still have faith in the Eagle. Word has spread that you've come — and people are inching forward to lend their support. They're frightened — well, they've a lot of reasons to be frightened. But they believe. And when they see you, they won't be able to doubt you. You are truly the image of the Hakubi Priest — his blood daughter, even after all these generations."

"I doubt he'd want to acknowledge me." Washu flexed her fingers experimentally, flickers of golden energy blazing across her nails as she did so. "My magic may be that of the Hakubi, Mayuka, but it was never the power of the Eagle. I only have whatever gifts were carried through my family's line. I never wore the coronet of Kihaku, and I never bonded with the Eagle's magic."

"But you could, couldn't you?" Mayuka asked quizzically. "I mean, your family have that ability, to call on the Eagle's magic and use it through you?"

"It's not so simple as that." Washu turned away from the makeshift mirror, looking pensive. "Kihaku no longer exists. As a planet, it was destroyed. That's where your meteor came from. It was part of the World, after it exploded. Kihaku's soul is gone… the planet is dead."

"I don't know." Mayuka frowned, glancing down at the bracelets that glittered around her wrists. "If that was true, Washu-sama, surely these wouldn't feel so powerful, against my skin? I know that they've

enhanced my own ability to see things. It's thanks to them I've had visions, I'm sure. And that I can see through so clearly to the souls of others. It doesn't work so well when I don't wear them. Only when I do."

"Perhaps." Washu acknowledged. "But even if there was some residual magic in that rock, Mayuka, it's only a very small part of what was once a raging spirit within a living planet. You have no idea of the amount of power involved. This is nothing in comparison."

"You believe the Eagle is dead, don't you?" Mayuka asked sadly. Washu opened her mouth to respond, then hesitated, taking in the despondant look on her companion's young face. She shook her head.

"No." She said softly. "Nothing that you have faith in is truly dead, Mayuka. Remember that, okay? If you believe the Eagle is watching over you, then he probably is. He doesn't need the planet to exist. He has all of you, keeping his legacy alive."

Mayuka looked startled, then she smiled.

"Yes, you're right." She agreed. "I believe he's there, so he is. And I believe he brought you to us, so he did. And you are here, Washu-sama. You are the Priestess. I believe in you, too. So you must be the one we've waited for."

"I suppose I can't argue with my own logic, used so cleverly against me." Washu laughed, despite herself.

"Washu-sama, if you wore my bracelets, would it help you to focus your magic?" Mayuka asked quizzically. Washu shrugged.

"I've no idea." She answered honestly. "I relied on Kihaku's core to enhance my magic without realising it for years. Since the planet died, I've had to draw more and more on my own strength. I know I'm strong now — stronger on my own than I ever was before. I'm not sure what would happen, if I tried to access the residual power in that stone now. I know that Kii magic is intense, and it already reacted to my DNA once. It might be counter-productive."

"But your family and it, you were connected, weren't you? Once upon a time." Mayuka reasoned. "Your life and its life… bound together by time and space. Isn't that the truth? The Hakubi tribe and the World were always interlinked. It was when the Priestess was not a Hakubi that the World died. Wasn't it?"

"Yes." Washu agreed slowly. "But even if that is true, there's a lot I don't know. Things which you probably do, Mayuka — I've not thought like a Kii in a long, long time. If ever, truly."

“Try them anyway.” Mayuka suggested, slipping them off her wrists and holding them out. “It might help. You never know.”

Washu hesitated, then she shook her head.

“If it comes to it that I need them, I’ll ask you then.” She said softly. “For now, they belong with you.”

She sat down on Mayuka’s bed, eying her fingers with a rueful smile.

“Of course, I’m still missing my rings.” She mused absently. “But I suppose that can’t be helped. I dispensed with them when I left Kihaku… Lord only knows where they are now.”

“Rings?” Mayuka looked startled. “What kind of rings, Washu-sama?”

“Tribal rings.” Washu smiled. “Carved from gold and set with sea-gems in the image of the Eagle’s Feather. The Hakubi insignia… such as it was. When I decided to leave my life on Kihaku, I removed my rings and I abandoned them. I was no longer a Hakubi, you see, not in that sense. I didn’t want them weighing me down. When I left, after all, I left for good.”

“This kind of ring, Washu-sama?”

Tadashi’s voice startled them both, and Washu turned, staring at the guard in surprise as he entered the chamber, tossing something down onto the bed. Washu frowned, scooping it up, then raising her gaze to his.

“Where did you get this?”

“It was my father’s.” Tadashi shrugged. “Of course, he didn’t wear it. But it was a keepsake from his ancestry — his tribe.”

“I see.” Washu smiled, her green eyes lighting up with interest. “So your family are warrior people, Tadashi?”

“I don’t understand.” Tadashi looked blank, and Washu smiled, holding out the ring and dropping it into his outstretched palm.

“The Ohira.” She said simply. “They produced some of the strongest warriors on Kihaku — defenders of villages, that kind of thing. Few people messed with the territory of the Ohira. Only the Hakubi tribe moved safely through their land without escort — if anyone dared encroach on Ohira property, they might well be found missing a limb or a head the next day.”

“My people… were mercenaries?” Tadashi looked aghast. Washu

laughed, shaking her head.

“No. They were simply proud, strong people who defended their own from attack.” She said gently. “You have to remember that the Kihaku I knew had many, many tribal peoples living there. The Priest’s tribe were known to all, and essentially, the bond with the World made my family overlords of Kii interests. But beneath that, there were lots of squabbles over land and food. Especially if the harvests were bad.”

“I suppose that’s something we’ve lost.” Tadashi turned the ring over in his fingers. “I didn’t know. You really truly are that old, aren’t you, Washu-sama?”

“Yes, I truly am.” Washu agreed. “Though what good it will do you, I guess we’ve yet to find out.”

“How did you manage to live so long, though?” Tadashi demanded. “I thought… well… the legends say… if Kihaku…”

“My life force was not as tied to Kihaku’s as tradition would have you believe.” Washu said with a shrug. “But it did sustain me, up until it exploded. Now, I suppose, I live on my own strength. But before that, it was the World which kept me alive and as young as I am now.”

“Another Eagle miracle.” Mayuka murmured. “Washu, you had a ring like Tadashi’s?”

“More than one, yes. Once upon a time.” Washu nodded. “With the symbol for the Hakubi tribe in red and white sea-gem.”

“Red and white.” Tadashi frowned. “You know, there are several old rings in a vault within Yuzuha-sama’s base. She keeps them as trophies — I’m not sure why. Maybe to mark her subjugation over my people. Perhaps she has a Hakubi ring — if she did, maybe I could…”

“No.” Washu shook her head. “You’ve taken enough of a risk for me as it is, Tadashi. I won’t have you trying to steal in plain sight, when the penalty would probably be harsh. It’s just a trinket, after all. It doesn’t mean anything, especially not in this day and age.”

“Then what do we do now?” Mayuka wondered.

“I need to understand everything about Yuzuha’s coming to this planet.” Washu said simply. “You said that she claimed Juraians were her enemies and that they’d hurt her? I don’t have access to any of my computer technology here, but I’d like to know more about her involvement with Jurai. Is there anything written in your papers about

Yuzuha's coming, and the way in which she gained the trust of your people?"

"I'm not sure." Tadashi looked thoughtful. "There may be something, but it would be in dangerous territory."

"Is it very important to know, Washu-sama?" Mayuka asked curiously. "I don't know what computer technology is, but is it necessary to have all this information? Yuzuha is here now, and that's beyond dispute."

"Yes, but I need to know what kind of force I'm dealing with." Washu said candidly. "I'm a scientist, not a sorceress. Whether you understand that or not, it's not important. But I need evidence before I can act with any conviction. I know that Yuzuha is a demon of some sort — just by looking at her, I could feel the evil that emanates from within her. But I haven't seen her true form, and I don't know anything about the kind of demon she is. If I'm expected to fight her on your behalf, I need to know what I'm fighting. I've come up against evil forces before, and I know from experience that if you don't have your wits about you, you can easily lose your life."

"Then we'll have to take you to the Archive." Tadashi made up his mind, getting to his feet and pulling a heavy cloak from the pile of clothing at the end of Mayuka's bed. "Here. Put this on, Miko-sama. It will conceal your appearance, and with any luck, we can pass you off as another village woman from hereabouts. But it will be dangerous… you'll have to stick close to me and hope that noone questions us."

"If you told me where it was, I could go alone." Washu suggested, nevertheless taking the cloak from him and wrapping it around her shoulders, pulling the hood up over her neatly beaded hair. "I don't want to endanger you both."

"I know the palace better than anyone else." Tadashi shook his head. "Remember, before the meteor hit, I was one of her drones. And my family were always involved in things here, even before she came. I know all the passages and tunnels that exist. With my help, we might get there without being caught. Without it… you will probably be apprehended again. And if you say you need to know about Yuzuha before you take her on, well, maybe if you were re-captured, you might be hurt."

"Take care, both of you." Mayuka said softly. "I'll ask the Eagle to watch over you."

"There's one other thing you can do, Mayu-chan, whilst Washu-sama and I are busy." Tadashi turned to his companion, touching her

cheek gently. “You can pass on the word to the others who support us in our cause for freedom. Let them know that the Eagle hasn’t forgotten us, after all.”

“I will.” Mayuka nodded her head. “And I will see you back here, as soon as both of our errands are completed.”

With that she disappeared through the dark archway and into the network of tunnels, and Washu frowned.

“These friends of yours, do they know who Mayuka is?” She asked. Tadashi shook his head.

“No. Only that she has rebel sympathies.” He replied. “But Mayuka is the image of her dead father, and Yuzuha killed him herself, face to face. She would know, as soon as she saw Mayuka, that she was a descendant of Masoto and a threat to her position. A figurehead.”

“Like me.” Washu looked thoughtful. “Very well. Then we shouldn’t waste any time, either. Tadashi-san, Yuzuha mentioned when she spoke to me that I wasn’t the one she sought… tell me, is the one she fears the Priestess of Kihaku?”

“Yes.” Tadashi confirmed. “She knows that native legends are strongly in favour of the Hakubi’s eventual return. She’s never been able to completely stamp out such ideas. We can’t let her know you are here — or who you truly are — until you’re ready to face her head to head. She has very strong magic, and it has already caused the deaths of many innocent people.”

“Then I will do my best to prevent that from happening again.” Washu said softly. “All right, Tadashi. I will follow. Let’s go.”

“How much longer before we land?”

Tenchi leant up against the wall of the spaceship, gazing restlessly out into the black expanse that lay before them. “Are we drawing closer to the planet now? It still looks like stars and nothing else to me… how near are we?”

“You’re starting to sound like one of those kids who bleats ‘are we nearly there yet’ at every interval.” Ryoko eyed him reprovingly, but there was an affection in her eyes that belied the harshness of her words. “We’re a lot closer than we were — almost at the planet’s orbit. I can see it more clearly now, the closer we get to it. Tokimi’s right — it is like it has a white shadow. I can see what she means now we’re so near to it. We’ll be landing soon, I’m sure.”

“I’ve never seen a planet quite like that one before.” Kiyone admitted absently, pressing her fingers up against the glass. “In all the patrolling Mihoshi and I have done, I’ve never come across an atmosphere like it.”

“Hey, hang on a minute, Kiyone, are you saying *you* can see this planet too, now?” Mihoshi demanded. Kiyone started, looking surprised.

“That’s true.” She murmured. “How come I can see it, when I couldn’t see it before? Ten minutes ago the sky was just full of stars — why is it I can see it now?”

“I can see it too.” Seiryo mused. “You still see nothing, Mihoshi?”

“No. Nothing at all.” Mihoshi looked frustrated. “I want to see it too — why can’t I?”

“This planet is too, too weird.” Ryoko pursed her lips. “Tenchi, with all his Jurai power, can’t see this place? But Kiyone and Seiryo — who, lets face it, have no power at all — they can? What’s that about?”

“I wonder if it’s Kihaku that is the connection.” Seiryo rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “After all, we know that this whole business is linked to Kihaku in some way, don’t we?”

“Kihaku?” Tokimi looked startled, gazing up at her adoptive brother in confusion. “Nii-chan is from Jurai. Not Kihaku.”

“No, true.” Seiryo nodded his head. “But Kii magic has touched me before. And Kiyone, too. Washu has always said that you never eradicate the impact of that magic completely — once it’s touched your soul, it can’t be completely erased. I wonder if that’s why we can now see it. When I… when I encountered Kii magic in the past, I was able to see things that only the Kii can see, because of it. I had the same sight Tokimi and Washu both do, if only for a brief period of time. It would make sense.”

“Nii-chan… had Kii sight?” Tokimi’s eyes became big as she digested this. “But… not now?”

“No, Tokimi. Not now.” Seiryo looked rueful, his eyes troubled as he realised how close he had come to delving into dangerous memories. “I was a fool who did something I did not understand the consequences of. That is all.”

“You might be right, though.” Kiyone reflected. “Otherwise, it would be stupid for us to see something that Tenchi can’t see. But

Tenchi has no connection to Kihaku at all. You and I — I suppose in a way, we do."

"But you said you were all better now. Cured." Mihoshi shot Seiryo a wary look. "Aren't you? Or are you still crazy? Because if you are…"

"No, I'm not crazy." Seiryo looked faintly amused. "Or no more than your average Juraian nobleman. But I suppose it is like taking any wound in a fierce battle. The wound heals, but leaves a scar. That's all. And ultimately, Washu's magic was what healed me, also. I must have been affected in some permanent way by Kihaku's power, given that."

"Well, I don't think Washu did the same where I was concerned, but I do know that I was scarred by Kii magic." Kiyone said frankly. "Still, if it makes me better at my job now, I don't particularly mind. Are we going to land on this planet today, Seiryo, or just dance around it talking about past misdemeanours? Because we're getting much closer to the atmosphere, and we'll crash onto its surface if you don't stop deliberating and start plotting coordinates."

"Unko already knows the path to take. My ship is more intelligent than you give it credit for, and so am I." Seiryo said lightly. "Have a little faith in my pilot skills, Kiyone. We will not crash."

"After Ryo Ohki, I'm not sure how much faith we should have in that claim." Ryoko said darkly, reaching up a hand to scratch her spaceship under the chin. "But I guess we don't have a lot of choice, since you're the only one who knows how to fly this crate properly."

"Thank you, Lady Ryoko. Your confidence in me is overwhelming." Seiryo bowed his head mockingly in her direction, and she grimaced back at him, dropping down into an empty seat.

"I know Washu is down there." She added unecessarily. "I don't know how I do, but I do."

"I didn't think you and Washu shared that kind of bond." Tenchi looked startled, gazing at his fiancee in surprise. Ryoko shrugged her shoulders.

"Me either. I'm just telling you what I think." She said flatly. "She's there, I know she is. And so does Ryo Ohki. She can see the world now, because she can read my thoughts and see it through my eyes. She's sure this is the place, too. As we get closer, we're both certain that this is where she is. I want to get down there and find her, before she makes a nusiance of herself any further."

"Do you think that Washu-neechan is all right, Ryoko-san?" Tokimi

turned, casting the pirate a beseeching glance, and Tenchi saw the genuine anguish in the girl's blue eyes. "Is she… is she okay?"

"I don't know that, and I wish I did." Ryoko sighed. "I'm just sure that she's there. That's all. Nothing else."

"We're about to enter the atmosphere, so we'll be able to find out all this for ourselves shortly." Seiryo said frankly. "Brace yourselves for landing… it looks like this is a planet without climatic control, and who knows what the weather will be like."

"A planet like the Earth, then?" Tenchi looked surprised. Seiryo nodded.

"Of that ilk." He agreed. "Which makes it more complicated for space vessels to go in and out. It seems likely to me that this planet isn't really used to space travellers… which might be explained by their apparent invisibility most of the time. We should be very careful, when we disembark. We have no idea what kind of place we are going into."

"A savage paradise, that's what Ryo Ohki's memories recorded." Ryoko said thoughtfully. "I think you might be right. A place devoid of that kind of technology."

Kiyone's eyes narrowed.

"Wasn't Kihaku like that, too?" She demanded. "Seiryo, you must've been there. What do you remember?"

"About Kihaku?" Seiryo looked taken aback. "Why would I know anything about it?"

"Surely you went to Kihaku at one point or another. I mean… before." Kiyone's gaze flitted briefly to Tokimi, changing her sentence in mid-speech, and Tenchi saw a clouded look cross the nobleman's eyes.

"I do not remember everything as clearly as I should." He admitted. "I don't remember ever seeing the surface of Kihaku, Kiyone. If I went there, it is not within my recollections. Besides, by that time, Kihaku was a dead world. It was no longer inhabited. Washu and Tokimi were the only people who survived when the planet died. So even if I had seen it, it wouldn't look anything like the Kihaku that Tokimi remembers."

"*Does* Tokimi remember?" Mihoshi looked doubtful. "I mean, if her brain really is broken…"

"Mihoshi." Tenchi intervened at this moment, holding up his hands

as he realised his tactless friend was about to reveal something she should not. “That’s not the issue here. Tokimi was very ill when Kihaku was destroyed — but I’m sure she remembers a lot of things from before that happened. Don’t you, Tokimi? You remember your world, don’t you?”

Tokimi was silent for a moment, then she raised tragic blue eyes to the Prince’s. Slowly she nodded.

“I remember Kihaku.” She murmured. “Before the World died.”

“That’s what I thought.” Tenchi offered her a smile. “Your people didn’t have spaceships and things, did they?”

Tokimi hesitated, then shook her head.

“The Settlers came. They had ships.” She said softly. “But not the Kii. No. We did not.”

“Like my people, on the Earth.” Tenchi grinned at her, and was relieved to see a faint smile in return. “They don’t have spaceships much either, Tokimi. Like your people, they prefer to stay with the places and things they know best.”

“Washu-neechan lives on this Earth.” Tokimi’s expression became thoughtful. “Because… it is like Kihaku? Would Tokimi like Earth, if she saw it?”

“Maybe you can visit it and see for yourself, one day.” Tenchi suggested. “When Washu is safe. You know you’d be very welcome to come.”

“This is nice, but it’s not getting us anywhere.” Kiyone pressed her hands up against the glass. “So we know that Kihaku was devoid of technology before Jurai invaded it, but even if that is true, I don’t see how that connects to what’s going on here. This planet isn’t Kihaku, after all. Kihaku is gone, and these are the wrong coordinates. So that stuff is irrelevant.”

“Not necessarily.” Seiryo shook his head. “We still have the Kii prayer that Princess Sasami saw in her vision. The one that Tokimi wrote down.”

“This one?” Mihoshi scooped up the sheet of paper from the table, and Seiryo nodded.

“It looks like a bunch of funny pictures to me.” Mihoshi frowned, turning it upside-down as she struggled to make sense of Tokimi’s writing. “Is this really a prayer? It looks like someone’s doodles.”

“It’s written in Tokimi’s language. Kii.” Kiyone said evenly. “That’s why we can’t read it, Miho. Only Tokimi and Washu can read these words.”

“Then why did Sasami know it?” Mihoshi looked mystified. “She’s not Tokimi and she’s not Washu. Unless she’s turning into one of them too — I mean, she is Tsunami too, right? So that means…”

“That means your logic is as screwed up as ever, Mihoshi.” Kiyone sighed. “Sasami saw the prayer in a vision, from what Seiryo’s said. But she didn’t understand what it meant. She just wrote down what she saw, and Tokimi translated it for her. Just because Sasami is Tsunami doesn’t mean she can start turning into other people too, you know — trust you to get the whole thing confused.”

“Well, it’s confusing.” Mihoshi defended herself, setting the prayer down. “No wonder the language died out. It makes no sense.”

“To Tokimi it does.” Seiryo said softly, and Tenchi was aware of the concerned look he sent in his charge’s direction. “And to Washu, too. Which is why we have to get to the bottom of this and find out what the connection is. If we do that, I think we’ll locate Washu — so that’s what we must keep in mind. Prepare to land, everyone. We’re going down.”

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

So, things were afoot on Rikishouki.

Yuzuha paused at the window of her chamber, her eyes narrowing as she pulled her cloak more tightly around her shoulders, shielding her skin from the glare of the hot morning sun. It had been almost a full day since the escape of the outland prisoner, and despite the best efforts of her soldiers, no trace of the woman had been found. When the guards from the cells had been brought before her, trembling with fear, they had all been quite clear on one fact — that the visitor, whoever she was, had used some kind of witchcraft to escape her bonds.

“Her cuffs were found in the cell, still fastened, undamaged, yet removed from her body.” She muttered. “And some great force blew open the doors to such a degree that it will take several of these stupid fools days to properly repair it. The cage door is still locked, yet she walks free. And she has disappeared from sight without a trace, despite all my attempts to seek her out.”

Her lips thinned.

“All attempts to find the craft in which she landed have also failed.” She remembered. “Presuming that she came to this planet with a ship at all. Maybe she has left, but somehow… somehow…”

She frowned, turning her mind back to her brief meeting with the traveller, when she had still been a prisoner.

“She did not seem remarkable.” She realised. “Young, pretty, somewhat foolish. She spoke Galactic Tongue, and carried no distinguishable native accent. And yet… something…”

She clenched her fists, bringing them down hard on the stone cell as her frustration flickered out around her body in a sudden haze of light.

“Something has changed.” She acknowledged. “I can’t put my finger on what it is, but something has. It’s like the atmosphere of this planet has suddenly awoken. Since her escape, the heathen people believe there is some loophole in my grasp, and if I allow it to go on, it will result in full blown rebellion. They are simple, foolish folk —

they cower beneath my power. But if a sorcerer roams free around this world, however guileless she might seem — people may flock to her instead. They may even begin believing their foolish legends and think she is the missing Priestess that most likely died so many centuries ago. I must know her whereabouts. I must terminate her, somehow."

She turned towards the door of her chamber, flexing her fingers and the wood-panel divide swung open, startling the guard on sentry duty outside.

"Lady Yuzuha?" The young man snapped to attention almost immediately, raising his hand in a salute as he met his mistress's steely glare.

"Shouhei." She said softly, beckoning the youngster into her quarters, and with a moment of hesitation, the guard obeyed, dropping on his knees before her in obeissance.

"My Lady?"

"Tell me, Shouhei, have you been on duty outside my quarters all day?"

"Yes, my Lady."

"Then it is time you had some exercise." Yuzuha said levelly. "I have an errand for you."

"Yes, my Lady?"

"Where is your captain today?"

"Priestess?"

"Tadashi. Where is he? I understood that his duty encompassed my protection this morning."

"I… I don't know, Lady Yuzuha." The young man — no more than sixteen summers — trembled slightly as he made his admission. "The… the captain has not reported for duty this morning. He… I… we assumed he was on an errand for you, Lady Yuzuha. So I… I have humbly offered to stand in his place."

"I see. How interesting." Yuzuha pursed her lips. "Then do me this service, Shouhei. Find the Captain for me, and bring him here. I will hear his report personally, and then, if it is adequate, I will have a further task for him to perform. Go now, and locate him. And be quick about it! I am not patient this morning, and I will not suffer more irresponsibility on the part of those who serve me."

"Lady Yuzuha…"

That is a direct order, Shouhei. “Yuzuha’s eyes narrowed, and a flicker of something dark and sinister darted across her eyes.” I don’t care for your sentiment. I care for your obedience. If Captain Tadashi is not obedient to my will, he will be disciplined. Whether you think well of him or otherwise, his overriding loyalty is to me.”

“Yes, Priestess.”

“Good boy.” Yuzuha bestowed him with a faint smile. “You have chosen wisely. And Shouhei? If he resists, take him by force. If he should die in this confrontation, so be it — but I will not be pleased if you return to me empty-handed. This is a direct order — in this my will overrides your loyalty to your superior officer. Ignoring it will result in your punishment at my hand.”

The young man gulped, scrambling to his feet as he made a fervent bow.

“Yes, Lady. As soon as possible. I swear.” He babbled, turning and scurrying from the chamber. Once alone, Yuzuha allowed herself a malicious smirk, raising her hand to close the chamber door once more. Unfastening her cloak from around her shoulders, she dropped the rich garment down on the end of her bed, examining her reflection in the mirror.

“So Captain Tadashi has not been seen since the prisoner escaped.” She murmured. “And if any would know his whereabouts, it would be that snivelling wretch, considering how he idolises the fool when he thinks I’m not looking. It is as I thought. My guards did report pursuing the woman in the direction of his quarters. Either he has met some fate at her hand, or, more likely, he is involved in her disappearance. I have suspected for some time that he is not all he seemed. He appears… too open, to free in his movements. I wonder if he is so convinced as his colleagues as to my overlordship here. Still, Shouhei is too afraid of me to disobey my orders. That he should be forced to betray one he considers like a brother is amusing to me, also — but such things must be done. They must learn that, in all things, my will is more important even than their fondness for one another.”

An amused smile twitched at her lips, as she watched the visage in the mirror copy her movements exactly. A woman stared back at her, long brownish fair hair tied back from her face in a functional style, and her eyes gleamed with life and vitality. Human fingers reached out to touch her other self, approving of what she saw.

“Even the Kii might not serve me so blindly if they saw who truly leads them.” She acknowledged. “This guise suits me well, when I can

maintain it. But if I am right about Captain Tadashi, my lure has not been holding him quite so securely of late. In the beginning, his actions pleased me, and the respect he and his kin before him commanded among the others made it easy for me to issue my commands. But now… something has changed. I must know his actions, and if they are a threat to me. This is my world — I have claimed it and I will not let it go. Rikishouki belongs to Yuzuha now."

She paused, her eyes little more than glittering slits of light as she contemplated the situation further. Then, at length, she nodded her head, clasping her hands together as her aura flickered more strongly around her diminuitive form.

"Isao." She murmured, and with a crackle of energy, the guardsman materialised before her, startled and disorientated by the suddenness of her summons. She chuckled at his confusion, watching with a mixture of derision and amusement as he scrambled to make his bow before her.

"Isao, I have sent Shouhei on an errand." She said softly. "I want you to follow him, and ensure he carries out my commands. He is a child and easily swayed. You are a man and your loyalty to me has been proven in the past. Prove it to me again, Isao, and you will be rewarded."

"Shouhei?" Isao looked startled, and Yuzuha nodded, flexing her fingers slightly as she observed the distant, slightly cloudy emptiness that crept across her companion's vision.

"Yes." She agreed. "Do not let him know you are trailing him, Isao. I still seek the maiden who escaped my cells, and I will not tolerate failure. Not even from you, my most loyal guardsman. Serve me well and you will be the new Captain of the Guard."

"Captain?" Isao murmured. "But Lady… Tadashi-san is…"

"Serve me well and you will be thus rewarded." Yuzuha whispered. "Tadashi's favour can fail, Isao, and so can yours. Do as I tell you and do not question my wishes. Now! Before I change my mind!"

"Yes, Lady Yuzuha." Isao jerked his head forward in a bow, raising his hand in a sharp salute. "I understand your orders, and I shall carry them out. I shall pursue Shouhei and I shall report back to you what I learn as soon as I can."

"Good." Yuzuha smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. "Then, perhaps, I shall *truly* learn what goes on behind the scenes of my planet!"

“This place is truly like a maze, even above ground.”

Washu clambered carefully over the piles of stones and rubble, following Tadashi cautiously through the grounds of the big stone construction that Yuzuha had termed her palace. “I’m glad that you’re with me, you know. You weren’t kidding when you said that I’d need a guide. I’m fairly good at finding my way, but there are so many destroyed outbuildings, I’d lose my way very easily.”

“Yes, that’s why I came.” Tadashi agreed. “It’s a risk though, Washu-sama. The closer we get to the centre of her power, the more likely it will be that she will know you’re here. Especially when we’re inside. She’s met you, and she never forgets a name or a face, once she has.”

“She doesn’t know my name. I didn’t give it to her, because I didn’t know what I was involved in at that time.” Washu said frankly. “But I take your point about my appearance. I assume she’s never seen the paintings Mayuka showed me of the Priest of Kihaku?”

“No, but I’m sure it’s not the only likeness of the Hakubi tribe. The archive is probably teeming with other accounts.” Tadashi said grimly. “And I believe Yuzuha-sama did a lot of reading there, while she healed from her wounds. I’m not sure myself what injuries she sustained against these people from Jurai, to be truthful. But I do know that she was tended here, and during her convalescence, she must have spent much time being told about our culture and our ways. She speaks Kii fluently, if brokenly at times, and she didn’t when she landed. I think it was always in her mind to take over this world, as soon as my people approached offering their help to her.”

“Probably.” Washu agreed grimly, skipping nimbly over a sprawling tree root. “She’s a demon, Tadashi. Simple as that. I never saw one before, but I’m in no doubt that she’s not like the other evil people I’ve encountered in my time. She’s something else entirely — some true evil spirit from some world beyond anything we understand. It’s hard to explain — but that’s why I want to know as much about her as I can. Someone who can learn another language almost instantaneously must have incredible powers of recollection — and if you say she remembers names and faces without fail, it seems likely that everything she’s ever read about the Kii has remained in her memory since. That being so, she probably knows more about me than I do at the moment. Which is why I want to be prepared. I will help your people, Tadashi, but I don’t like going into a fight unprepared.”

“I have faith in you, Washu-sama.” Tadashi said seriously. “Because

Mayuka does, and because… because what she says is true. You do bear the Priest's likeness in your face. I'm sure you are who you seem to be."

"I wish I knew if I was." Washu admitted. "But I'll do my best. That's all I can do."

She frowned, gazing up at the immense stone structure.

"How old is this building, do you know?"

"It was here in the time of the ancestors I knew. That's all I know for sure." Tadashi shrugged helplessly. "I think it is probably older than that. But I don't know how much more. I'm sorry. I never really paid attention."

"It's a strong fortress, and it has secret passages inside and out." Washu mused. "Yet you don't know who built them, or why they felt it necessary to install such passages?"

"I'm afraid not." Tadashi looked apologetic. "Why… is it important?"

"Only if the building was constructed to provide protection of some sort for a people who felt threatened at the time." Washu shrugged. "But if you say it was built in the time of your long dead ancestors, then it was here when Yuzuha arrived. So she is not the threat they feared then."

"No. It's been here since before I was born." Tadashi confirmed. "But what other force would possibly make my people feel that way? We've never fought each other in the way you said the ancient tribes of Kihaku did. Getting here, surviving — it brought all the remaining members of those families together and broke down those divides."

"I was rather thinking of Jurai." Washu said pensively, gazing up at the fortified walls. "As if they worried that one day, people would come to look for the craft that crashed and those that piloted it, before the Kii bid to escape."

"Maybe." Tadashi looked taken aback. "I suppose they might have. But noone ever did come, Washu-sama. Noone, until Yuzuha did."

"Not even a random visitor, like me?" Washu looked surprised. Tadashi shook his head.

"I don't think so." He agreed. "It was uninhabited when we landed here, and until Yuzuha, noone else ever came. People have arrived since, but all have been put to death by her will. You're the first to escape. Mayuka and I were hoping to free you anyway — to ask your

help in tracking down our missing Priestess. We got rather more than we bargained for, though — it turned out we didn't need to send out a search after all."

"And Yuzuha always stays inside these walls?"

"No." Tadashi shook his head. "She attends her executions, at dawn, when she holds them. But they weaken her. She is not strong against our sunlight, it seems… though noone has ever had the courage or foolhardiness to challenge her at these times. She swathes herself in thick cloaks and she retreats to her chambers as soon as the event is over. It seems that even when she is so weakened, her power is still enough to hurt those around her. So noone chances it."

"Interesting." Washu's eyes narrowed. "As if she were some kind of, well, creature that associated itself with darkness. That light is uncomfortable for her — I will remember that. No doubt it will hold some relevance later on."

"The Archive that our ancestors began is this way." Tadashi said with a smile. "There's a quick way around the back and we'll miss the morning patrol if we go this route. I know they're due to come through here in about ten minutes or so — another good reason why you need my company on this little trip."

"It's there?" Washu looked startled. "That wing, there? That's the Archive?"

"Yes." Tadashi confirmed. "There are locks and they're stiff, but I think I have a key."

"There are easier ways." Washu shook her head, grabbing her companion by the hand and phasing them firmly through the thick stone wall and into the building before Tadashi realised what was going on. Once inside, he pulled his fingers away, putting his hand to his chest as he eyed her uncertainly.

"What did you do to me?"

"Brought you inside via the quick route." Washu's eyes twinkled with mischief. "It saves you time and effort finding keys. If this is where we need to be, this is where we are. Don't look so freaked out, Tadashi. I only phased you through one stone wall. It's nothing. Really."

"Is this a Hakubi power?" Tadashi drew a deep breath into his lungs, eying her warily. Washu nodded.

"I imagine so. My daughter does it too, so she probably inherited it

from me." She agreed glibly. Tadashi's eyes widened at this.

"You have a…? There are more…?"

"Let's not worry about that for the time being." Washu said frankly. "We're here to stop Yuzuha. Aren't we? And for that I need information. Knowledge is the key to every door, did you know that?"

"I've not heard it said before." Tadashi admitted, recovering his composure. "I have also never seen anyone do anything like that before, Washu-sama. Is that how you escaped from your cell? You walked through the wall?"

"Yes, sort of." Washu agreed. She grinned at him impishly. "But really, you've seen nothing yet."

She glanced around her, realising that they were in a long, narrow room, the floor paved with rich reddish stone slabs and the ceiling high and arched in wood. The chamber itself was old, but not so old as the paintings below the ground, and Washu decided that it had been built after the Kii had settled on Rikishouki, probably after the death of those who had originally made the perilous journey through space. The walls were lined from floor to ceiling with shelves, each of them stacked high with scrolls and wood-bound volumes tied with rich dyed ribbon, and for a moment, Washu felt a pang of wistful nostalgia for the old Priest's library she had spent so much time in as a child.

"Washu-sama?" Tadashi's voice brought her back to herself, and she smiled, eying him ruefully.

"My father had a chamber like this. It took me back to my youth." She admitted. "I'm sorry. I'm having a lot of flashes to my past since I touched down here. That the culture of my people could have survived so long without me knowing it… it's a little surreal, seeing all these things that I thought only I could remember existing."

"Well, I'm glad that you could see it, then." Tadashi smiled. 'Everything here is stored in order of generation, I think. Yuzuha has only been here for the past fifteen cycles, so anything relating to her coming will be at that end of the Archive.' He pointed. "But it might not be very useful. After all, she's been in control of what gets recorded since she's been here. I doubt you'll find anything that will tell you her weaknesses."

"On the contrary, I'm hoping to find out her strengths." Washu said dryly. "I'm looking for her propaganda, Tadashi, as much as anything else. You can learn a lot about an enemy who records her own glories

in writing. Even more so, sometimes, than you can learn from an unbiased factual account. I want to understand the mind of this demon, and what drives her. Your information about the sun is interesting and probably useful. But I need more than that."

"You're so cautious." Tadashi pursed his lips, leaning up against the stone wall as the scientist began to rummage through the newest scrolls. "Really, is all of this necessary?"

"You are young, Tadashi." Washu paused, eying him keenly. "Too young for the death of Kihaku to really mean anything to you. But I'm not. A lot of people suffered and died when the World was cleansed. Innocent people, helpless people. People without protection. I won't have the same thing happen on Rikishouki. Yuzuha needs to be stopped, yes. But not at the expense of the people who live here. I saw enough conflict and death when my father and my sister held the Eagle's coronet. I will not be that kind of Priestess."

Tadashi looked chastened.

"I'm sorry." He murmured. "It must have been very terrible. I suppose we don't think of it, being that it was so long past. We remember the courage of those who came here to start a new life. Not what terrors they left behind."

"But even those people killed innocents in the name of their freedom." Washu said softly. Tadashi frowned, shaking his head.

"They killed Juraians." He said simply. Washu smiled.

"And all of Jurai's people are evil, in your eyes?" She chided gently. "Even those who simply do as you do — live their lives and try to support their families? I imagine that those who piloted the crafts that transported your ancestors probably had relatives to mourn their passing. People are people, wherever they are born."

"I…" Tadashi faltered, confused, and Washu rested a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"This is what I have learnt, living the life I life now." She added simply. "In the company of people who, in some ways, are wiser than I am about such things. So if you don't mind, we'll do this my way. If I am going to act for you, I'm going to act cleanly and concisely. I am not going to spill the blood of Rikishouki's people. There is always another way."

"But you will kill Yuzuha?" Tadashi demanded. Washu shrugged.

"If I have to, I suppose I will." She hazarded. "But I don't know, yet.

I will remove her threat from your people. That's what I've promised to do. How I do it, that shouldn't matter. Should it?"

"I suppose it shouldn't." Tadashi eyed her keenly. "You know, the more I hear you talk, the more I really do believe Mayuka's convictions. She might be the one having the visions, but the longer I spend in your company, the more I'm persuaded by your words. You know far more about the world than any of us. We've needed you for a very long time."

"But maybe if I'd come then, I would not have known all the things I know now." Washu said matter-of-factly. "Such is life… a lesson of experiences. That's all."

"Captain Tadashi!"

A voice from the end of the hallway interrupted the conversation at that moment, and both Washu and Tadashi turned to face a young man, dressed in the guard's regalia. His eyes were clouded with fear and apprehension, and in his hand he clutched one of the peculiarly carved swords that Washu had observed amid Yuzuha's men before.

"Shouhei!" Tadashi's expression became one of consternation and he frowned, taking a step towards the youngster. "Why are you here? You have no authority to patrol this part of the palace. Lady Yuzuha…"

"Lady Yuzuha seeks you, Captain." Shouhei spoke slowly and carefully, his gaze darting to Washu as his grip tightened on his sword. "She wishes to know why you have not been on duty this morning."

"I see." Tadashi's eyes narrowed. "And she sent you to kill me, if I refused to answer her summons?"

"Lady Yuzuha's orders supercede yours, Captain." Shouhei bowed his head. "I am instructed…"

Tadashi sighed.

"She will hurt you if I don't come, won't she?" He asked softly. Shouhei flinched, and his lack of reply seemed to tell Tadashi what he needed to know. He frowned, meeting Washu's quizzical gaze briefly for a moment.

"Then I suppose I have to come with you, and answer the Priestess's questions." He said quietly.

Relief flooded Shouhei's features, and he turned his attention to Washu.

“Your companion must come too.” He said, more sure of his ground now he knew there would be no fight. “She is not a member of Lady Yuzuha’s retinue. She will need to identify herself and present her papers to the Priestess. Noone may enter the Archive without such authorisation from Lady Yuzuha.”

“And if I refuse?” Washu asked softly. The boy faltered for a moment, then resolution glittered in his blue eyes and he raised his sword.

“Then I must follow my Priestess’s orders.” He said softly. “And I will have to kill you.”

“Well, wherever we are, I think we’re here.”

Seiryo stepped cautiously out of the Unko’s transmission beam, turning to glance at their surroundings as he slid a hand into the folds of his cape, locating the remote device and activating his spaceship’s cloaking mechanism. All around them, trees grew thick and wild, the branches wound tightly with vines and other plant-life unlike anything the nobleman had ever seen on the structured, tailored landscape of his homeworld. Grass grew long and ragged beneath their feat, and the chirrup of birds in the trees caused him to raise his gaze, picking out unfamiliar feathered figures watching him from the boughs. Glimmers of warm sunlight danced through the gaps in the dense upper foliage, creating a mottled mosaic of life on the forest floor, and absently Seiryo found himself thinking how pretty the scene was.

“This place looks like noone’s ever been here.” Tenchi murmured, putting Seiryo’s own ponderings into words as he brushed his hand gently against the trunk of a tree. “Just woodland for miles around — is this really where Washu is? Somewhere here, in amongst all of this?”

“Ryo Ohki?” Ryoko cast her chocolate furred companion a quizzical glance, and the cabbit let out a mew of affirmation, leaping down from her mistress’s shoulder onto the ground as she sniffed at the grass. Ryoko frowned, then nodded her head.

“Ryo Ohki says this is the place.” She confirmed. “The land has the same scent. Without a doubt, this is where Washu is — or at least, where she last was, when Ryo Ohki was with her.”

“Then we should start looking around, see if we can find any clues.” Kiyone said practically, fingering the barrel of her gun as she did so. “And we should be aware of any sudden surprises. From what

you told us, Ryoko, Ryo Ohki saw Washu taken prisoner with remarkably little struggle. That being so, we need to be aware of whether or not we have company. Just because this place looks gentle and wild it doesn't mean that it is."

"Kiyone's right." Seiryo agreed grimly. "Appearances are often deceptive… we should be on our guard."

He cast a glance around him for Tokimi, relief flickering across his malachite gaze as he observed her a short distance away, bending to touch the petals of a low-growing flower.

"Tokimi, did you hear that?" He asked. "We need to keep our eyes and ears open, in case this place is dangerous."

"This world is like Kihaku." Tokimi raised her gaze, offering her companion a sunny smile, and Seiryo was taken aback to see how the preoccupation of being aboard his ship seemed almost to have vanished. "I like this World, Nii-chan. It's pretty and like my memories are. Is this where Washu has come?"

"We think so." Kiyone nodded her head. "Mihoshi, are you coming with us or aren't you? We can't stand around here all day. Washu is obviously not hiding inside that tree trunk, so I don't know why you're so fascinated by it."

"There's a hole in it, that's all." Mihoshi said unnecessarily, turning from where she had been examining a burrow-like gap in the bark of one of the trees. "It looks funny. I wanted to see if it had anything in there."

"Probably some wild animal's nest. You might get your fingers bitten." Kiyone warned. "Better not to touch what you don't understand."

"It doesn't look like an animal made it." Mihoshi insisted, and Seiryo came to peer over her shoulder, frowning as he ran his fingers over the neatly carved hole.

"She's right. It looks man-made." He acknowledged. "Like it was made this way on purpose, for some reason we don't understand."

"Why would you make a hole in a tree?" Ryoko looked flummoxed. "This place already makes no sense and we've been here ten minutes."

"To find the way home." Tokimi suggested, skipping forward and linking her arm in Seiryo's as she cast him another smile.

"What do you mean?" Seiryo looked startled. Tokimi shrugged, patting the trunk of the tree as she did so.

“This is the pathway.” She said simply. “It is the first tree. We find the second tree, and then the third. We leave the forest. That is why, yes? Tokimi remembers this way of not getting lost. When Tokimi was very little…”

She faltered, and for a moment the smile on her face faltered.

“When Tokimi was very little, she got lost in a forest like this.” She whispered. “Washu-neechan found me, and showed me the way to find the path. Then Tokimi never got lost again. Tokimi followed the trees, and always got back home.”

“So what you’re saying, in fact, is that this is some kind of signpost? That if we find other trees like it, we’ll find wherever these people are living?” Kiyone looked surprised. Tokimi nodded her head.

“It’s easy.” She agreed. “Like this. One tree. Two trees. That one is number three. I can see it. Follow me.”

“Tokimi, hang on a minute!” Seiryo called, but his companion was already skipping off in the direction of another tree, and after exchanging looks with his companions, Seiryo quickened his pace to catch up with her, indicating for the others to follow. As Tokimi had said, the trees were indeed marked in a specific, clear pattern, and as they reached the final one, Seiryo realised that they stood at the edge of the dense woodland, looking out onto a grassy, open plain.

“Tokimi-chan.” He shook his head slowly. “You never cease to amaze me.”

“I guess bringing her along was definitely a good idea.” Tenchi offered Tokimi a warm grin. “First you help find the planet, Tokimi-san, and now you’ve got us out of the forest. You’re really helpful to be with, you know that?”

Tokimi beamed, her blue eyes lighting up with pleasure at this praise, and she nodded.

“It is like Kihaku here.” She said with a shrug. “Tokimi remembers… Tokimi understands.”

“I don’t get why they didn’t just put up proper signposts though.” Mihoshi grumbled, reaching down to unhook a persistent sprig of briar from the leg of her uniform. “It would have been much easier if we could just read where we were going.”

“As it stands, we don’t know if the people here can read or write, though.” Seiryo pointed out. “Tokimi’s said that on Kihaku, not all the tribes used written language. Maybe it’s the same thing here. We don’t

know, yet. We haven't any idea what we're dealing with."

"And Tokimi's method worked." Kiyone added, shielding her eyes from the sun's glare as she squinted across the skyline. "I think I can see buildings in the distance, too. Ryoko, if you were to hover a little bit…?"

"I'm already on it." Ryoko flashed her a smile, launching herself up into the air as she gazed across the horizon in the direction Kiyone had indicated. She nodded her head.

"Definitely buildings of some sort, although that might be too generous a term for them." She agreed. "More like huts or hovels, gathered around something. Looks like a town square or something like that. Either way, we should probably head in that direction. Over the rise there's a bigger building — I'd almost call it a castle, such as it is. If they did take Washu a prisoner, I imagine that would be the direction they'd go."

"Then that's where we'll go, too." Tenchi said decidedly, one hand brushing the hilt of his sword. "And see what we can find out."

"Do you suppose anyone knows we're here?" Mihoshi asked apprehensively. "I mean, well, considering…"

"They had no climatic controls or sensors in the upper atmosphere." Seiryo said thoughtfully. "But there was dense cloud cover, coming down. In my recent experience, I've been made brutally aware how little I know about magic and magical auras. That being so, I wouldn't like to guess if some other force was guarding this planet."

"Something must be, if it stays invisible to passers-by." Ryoko agreed, setting down daintily on the turf. "There's also a small, derelict building over to the left, not too far from here. It's hidden at ground level by the lie of the land — but it might hold some clues. It looked like the sort of place noone has been in a while — to me that indicates its worth checking out."

"You think that they might choose somewhere like that to conceal a prisoner?" Kiyone shot the pirate a quizzical glance, and Ryoko shrugged.

"Pirate experience tells me that hiding a prize in plain sight works better than anything. Maybe." She owned. "It's at least worth a try. As Seiryo said — appearances can be deceptive. And it isn't far."

She cast Ryo Ohki a questioning glance.

“Any of this familiar to you yet, Ryo Ohki?”

Ryo Ohki yowled, pawing at her companion’s ear, and Ryoko nodded.

“I think Ryo Ohki wants us to head in that direction too.” She replied. “I get the feeling that, when she landed here before, it was in that general direction. Without transforming, she can’t be completely sure whether or not the settlement you saw is where Washu was taken prisoner… but it’s not impossible. So I vote we get a move on, and see what we can see.”

“The landscape sure is beautiful here.” Mihoshi reflected, as the motley group made its way through the vibrant green blades of grass in the direction Ryoko had indicated. “Don’t you think so? Like a tropical world. There’s nothing like this on Seniwa. Everything is so boring and built and organised there. I wish it was more like this.”

“I know what you mean.” Tenchi acknowledged. “It reminds me a little of the Earth’s mountains, but even so, it’s still different. It does have a tropical magic to it, Mihoshi… it makes you wonder what kind of people live here.”

“The kind who abduct people without asking questions, clearly.” Ryoko said flatly. “Don’t get too sentimental about this place, either of you. Whatever creatures live here, they took Washu and we can’t forget that.”

“But she was a stranger and she wandered into their land.” Mihoshi said, with uncharacteristic perception. “Maybe they were just afraid of her.”

“Mihoshi might be right.” Seiryo admitted. “If you live on a world devoid of outside interference, anything alien must come as a shock. The Earth is not much different inasmuch as the people there reacted to the idea of external life in a very grim way… at least at first. Perhaps the natives here did perceive Washu’s presence as some kind of a threat.”

“Seiryo, *you* are the reason the people on the Earth were so twitchy about all of us from outside.” Ryoko said frankly. “You may not remember assaulting the nightclub in Osaka, and you might not have been yourself at the time. But there are people on Earth even now who haven’t forgotten it. And more, who still hold *me* responsible. Washu didn’t land on this planet looking for a fight. She wasn’t doing anything threatening when she and Ryo Ohki were here — I’ve been through Ryo Ohki’s memories and I’ve seen for myself. Unlike some people, who push great big silver tin cans through the atmosphere

looking for a fight, she was just taking a look around."

"*Lady* Ryoko, I would greatly appreciate it if that aspect of my past conduct was forgotten." Seiryo said quietly, his gaze flitting meaningfully towards Tokimi as he spoke, and Ryoko frowned, her gaze also going to the young Kii who trotted along ahead of them, humming some song or other under her breath.

"Maybe." She acknowledged. "But my point still stands. They'd have to be really, really isolated and paranoid to take someone randomly walking by as a potential invasion force."

"I imagine that's precisely the kind of world we've landed on." Kiyone reflected. "Isolated, certainly. No space travel. No technology. Nothing like that. How could they know what Washu was? I think Seiryo and Mihoshi are on the right track. I think they saw her as a potential threat and acted before she could."

"You think I'm right?" Mihoshi looked genuinely surprised. Kiyone nodded, sending her friend an affectionate grin.

"Don't look so stunned." She teased. "It has to happen sometime, right?"

"I guess so." Mihoshi returned the grin, her happy-go-lucky nature un-offended by the implication in her partner's words. She shrugged her shoulders, blond curls bouncing as she did so. "But even so, if there are people here, they're hiding themselves away. Unless, of course, they're really really tiny, or invisible, or something. In which case finding them is gonna be hard."

"And normal service is resumed." Ryoko looked amused.

"Huh?" Mihoshi sounded puzzled, and Seiryo let out a low chuckle.

"Don't worry about it, Mihoshi." He said evenly. "I don't think the people here are as invisible as their planet seems to be."

"You don't?" Mihoshi frowned. "How can you be sure?"

"Ryo Ohki saw people, when Washu was captured." Ryoko answered. "And from her memories, they didn't look much different to ordinary human folk."

Seiryo opened his mouth to comment, but hesitated, noticing that not only had they begun to descend the hill down towards the derelict building Ryoko had mentioned but that his young charge had stopped dead in front of him, her quick, eager fingers running over a large, flat slab of stone that stood some metres away from the structure itself. He frowned, coming to Tokimi's side.

“Something wrong, Tokimi?” He asked softly. Tokimi raised her gaze to his, eyes sparkling as she shook her head.

“It’s Kihaku.” She murmured. “Look, Nii-chan. Kihaku.”

She pointed at the rock, and Seiryo squinted, making out the faint engravings of characters beneath the moss and insect trails that mostly obscured any writing from view. At length he sighed, shaking his head.

“I can’t see anything except lines.” He admitted. “Are you saying there’s something written here? Something Kii?”

Tokimi nodded, excitement in her sapphire gaze.

“It says, ’Temple of The Eagle.” She said simply. “The World’s Temple.”

Seiryo’s brows knitted together, and carefully he pulled his sword from his belt, holding the white hot blade against the rock as he scorched away the residual greenery. He drew it away, dusting off the ash with his hands, and his eyes widened as he recognised the Kii characters that lay beneath. His finger brushed one of them, and he met his charge’s gaze with confused malachite eyes.

“This is that picture you said was always written but never said. The one that marks out the God from the rest.” He said softly. “It is, isn’t it? It’s the same symbol as was in the prayer you wrote down. The one Princess Sasami saw in her vision.”

Tokimi nodded her head again.

“It is Kihaku.” She repeated. “Tokimi… Tokimi has come home!”

Before he could stop her, she had darted ahead once more, hurrying eagerly towards the dilapidated building ahead.

“Tokimi, hang on a minute.” Seiryo called, but she paid him no heed, disappearing inside. Seiryo cursed, quickening his pace once more, and as he reached the opening of the stone structure, he realised that more unfamiliar characters were carved roughly on the walls. He peered cautiously around the opening, his breath catching in his throat as he registered the scene inside.

Overgrown and abandoned it clearly was, but even at a glance, Seiryo could tell this had once been a place of worship and contemplation. In a strange, ghostly parody of the Tsunami shrines he had helped oversee the reconstruction of on Jurai in recent months, the far wall of the building was engraved with a heavenly likeness, but instead of the reassuringly familiar branches of Tsunami’s divine

tree, the figure that gazed down on them was that of a bird of prey, its wings vibrant and unearthly as they spread out in an arc of protection, almost touching from wall to wall. The colours had begun to fade, and cracks had appeared in the creature's body, but despite this, it was clear that whoever had created this image, they had done so with the utmost of care.

On the stone slab floor, beneath the gaze of the immense creature, Tokimi knelt, hands clasped together as if in prayer as she gazed up at the mighty figure.

"What the hell is that?"

Ryoko's voice startled him from his reverie and he turned, shooting her a reproving look.

"It's an eagle." Mihoshi breathed, squeezing between the pirate and the lord as she struggled to see what was inside. "An eagle, like Tokimi had on Kihaku. Tenchi! Tenchi, come see this! It's Tokimi's eagle! The one she had on Kihaku!"

"Mihoshi, what are you shouting about?" Kiyone demanded, as she and Tenchi also entered the temple. She gasped as she saw the image on the wall, then cast a glance in Seiryo's direction.

"You know what that is?" She asked. Seiryo shrugged.

"What Mihoshi said." He said softly. "Tokimi's eagle."

"Tokimi's…" Tenchi frowned, gazing up at the likeness thoughtfully. At length, he nodded.

"When Tokimi… when that happened, it was like she was shielded by an Eagle's wings." He agreed. "I do remember, Mihoshi. When Tsunami confronted… when Tsunami was there. It was like two ancient, divine birds of prey, fighting for control of Kihaku. I suppose I never really thought about what it signified, though. Not really."

"I think we've found Kihaku's divine form." Seiryo said gravely. "Tokimi has spoken about the Eagle God and I know that the Eagle is the spirit that protected Kihaku. At least, the power manifested itself in such a way, the people called it the Eagle. Tokimi explained all of this to me, when we discussed the prayer. And it must be significant. The prayer itself mentions this Eagle, after all."

"The question is, what's it doing here?" Kiyone frowned. Slowly she inched forward, hesitating, then crouching at Tokimi's side.

"Tokimi, I need to ask you something." She said softly, and Tokimi turned, seemingly startled from her reverie by the Detective's voice.

“Yes? What is it, Kiyone-san?”

“This is your God, isn’t it?” Kiyone gestured towards the wall. “The Eagle of Kihaku.”

Tokimi nodded her head, making a curious gesture of reverence as she did so.

“Tokimi is home.” She whispered. “She must be. Kihaku isn’t dead. Washu isn’t kidnapped. Washu just… we just… this is Kihaku. We came home, that’s all. That’s why Washu is here. Because we’re on Kihaku, and Washu… Washu is the Priestess. Washu is the Priestess of Kihaku and that’s why she’s here!”

“Tokimi, this isn’t Kihaku.” Seiryo said gently. “Kihaku was destroyed a year ago — you know that.”

“No.” Tokimi got to her feet, shaking her head as an obstinate look entered her sapphire eyes. ‘This *is* Kihaku. Look, Nii-chan! The Eagle is here. The words are here. This writing, Tokimi can read it. It says, “*The Spirit of the World*.’ It is Kii.”

“Yes, maybe that’s true,” Seiryo began, but Tokimi was not about to let him finish. She grabbed him by the hands, a pleading look in her blue eyes.

“Tokimi is home.” She whispered. “Why won’t Nii-chan say so? Why not? This is the Eagle. This is my language. Who else speaks Tokimi’s language? Why else would Washu come here? Tokimi could see how to come here. Washu also. So it must be home, yes? The Eagle calls us home. That’s why. It is Kihaku. Kihaku isn’t dead!”

“Tokimi.” Seiryo sighed, biting his lip. “I know you want to believe this is your World, and I can’t explain why there are so many things here that remind you of your home planet. But Kihaku was definitely destroyed. It exploded into space a year or more ago. You were hurt in the blast, you know that. And that’s why you live with Suki and I now… because Jurai is your home, now Kihaku is gone. You know those things.”

“But… but…” Tokimi’s eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head again.

“Kihaku is here.” She said plaintively, patting the wall of the temple as if expecting the Eagle to rise up and defend her argument. “With Tokimi. Like before.”

“Kihaku got blown into a million, gazillion little pieces by one of Washu’s inventions.” Mihoshi said pensively, before anyone could stop

her. “You were there too, Tokimi. You must remember. You had Tenchi and I there, in a funny little box, then Tsunami came, and the world blew up, and Tsunami used her magic…”

“Mihoshi, shut up.” Tenchi said sharply, as the tears began to spill down Tokimi’s cheeks. “You’re upsetting her. Don’t go any further. It’s not important how Kihaku died.”

“It’s not true.” Tokimi whispered, glancing up at Seiryo as if looking for confirmation. “Kihaku *isn’t* dead! Kihaku is here! And Washu… Washu wouldn’t hurt the World! Washu… Washu…”

She faltered, and Seiryo swallowed hard, a stab of sympathy surging through him as he took in the dejected, frightened expression in his companion’s eyes.

“Kihaku is dead, Tokimi.” He said softly. “I’m sorry, but that’s just how it is.”

“No!” Tokimi pushed him away from her, her body shaking in clear agitation. “No! Nii-chan is lying! This *is* Kihaku! It *is*! It *is*! Washu came home! Washu knew she would be Priestess one day, and now she is! *She is*! That’s why she’s here, and Tokimi will find her! Everything will be normal again… everything will be like it was before! Before Washu-neechan left me — everything will be the same!”

“Tokimi!” Seiryo reached out a hand to grab her arm, but his companion was too quick for him, and she darted out of his grasp, pushing past a startled Mihoshi as she made a bee-line for the exit.

“Tokimi, come back here!” Kiyone exclaimed, but the girl took no notice, disappearing back along the pathway in the direction of the forest once more. Seiryo hurried outside, anxiety flooding through him, but by the time he reached the exit, she was nowhere to be seen. He cursed, banging his fist bad-temperedly against the temple wall.

“I’ll see if I can see her.” Ryoko offered, launching herself back into the air once more. “Mihoshi, you really are a clot sometimes, you know that? Washu would skin you alive if she knew you’d told Tokimi she blew up Kihaku.”

“But she did.” Mihoshi looked genuinely bewildered, on the verge of tears herself at the sudden change in the atmosphere. “I didn’t mean to do anything wrong — Kiyone, I…”

“It’s all right, Mihoshi. We’ll find her.” Kiyone sighed, running her fingers through her dark hair. “In truth, she probably shouldn’t even have been with us in the first place. Clearly she’s not as fit as she

appears to be… I'm not sure her mind is competent enough to understand all the technicalities."

"This place is obviously like Kihaku in some ways." Seiryo said, as he watched Ryoko scan the landscape for any sign of the missing Kii. "And I don't understand how it is that Tokimi found her deity and her language carved in stone here. But it isn't Kihaku, we know that. And it might be that someone is playing a very dangerous game."

"You think this is a trap?" Tenchi looked alarmed. Seiryo spread his hands.

"I wish I knew." He admitted, frustration in his tone. "Ryoko-sama, can you see any sign of her?"

"If it was a trap, it looks like someone's fallen right into it." Ryoko shook her head, dropping down onto the ground with a defeated sigh. "The kid's disappeared. Into the trees, most likely. She can't teleport like Washu and I can, can she? Her Kii magic is all gone now, right?"

"Yes, except her Kii sight. She must have gone back into the forest." Seiryo sighed, rubbing his temples. "So now we have both Tokimi *and* Washu missing. This gets better. Perhaps I should not have brought her. But… she did insist…"

"Recriminations aren't going to help now." Kiyone said frankly. "We need to find Tokimi and we need to find Washu. Tokimi can read the Kii lettering, so she might even find Washu before we do. But in case she doesn't, and knowing that there is some kind of population on this planet, we ought to split up."

"Split?" Tenchi frowned. "Is that a good idea? What if something happens?"

"We can stay in communication." Kiyone rummaged in her belt, pulling out her Police communication device. "Mihoshi, stop crying for a moment and give me yours too, will you?"

"My what?" Mihoshi stared at her friend blankly, and Kiyone gestured to her belt.

"That silver shiny thing you tied to your buckle so you didn't lose it." She said wearily. "Give it here, will you? We'll split into two parties, and each have one of these. Then we know where each other is. But we can't let Tokimi wander, and we need to help Washu. If she is in trouble, she's already been missing long enough to have gotten hurt."

"Well, I'm going to find Washu." Ryoko said quietly. "I don't care

what anyone else does, but that's why I came here in the first place."

"I'll stick with you." Tenchi agreed. "And between the two of us, we should be able to take care of ourselves. After all, we'll have Ryo Ohki, too. You three look for Tokimi. Seiryo-sama probably wants to, anyway. It seems to make sense."

"Seiryo?" Kiyone sent the nobleman a quizzical look, as Mihoshi fumbled with her belt, retrieving the device and handing it to her friend. Seiryo faltered, then nodded his head.

"I am agreeable." He replied softly. "I would be glad to have you both accompany me, Kiyone. I did, after all, seek the Galaxy Police's aid in this matter. It seems only fair."

"Then I'll give this to you, Ryoko, and you can use it if and when you find Washu." Kiyone pressed a few buttons on Mihoshi's communicator, then held her own out to the pirate. "I think you probably know how to use it better than Tenchi does, as it stands. Mihoshi's works, which is a miracle, so we should be fine keeping in contact."

"Got it." Ryoko nodded, taking the communicator and glancing at it, then sliding it into the sash of her gown. "Then we'll go our separate ways. You go back into the forest and see if you can find Tokimi. Tenchi and I, we'll head towards the big stone building I saw — the one that looks like a castle. With any luck, you'll find Tokimi quickly and then you can catch up to us — but if not, we'll see you back at the Unko."

She frowned, and Seiryo saw determination cross her face.

"*With* Washu." She added firmly. "All right, Tenchi. Let's go."

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

For a moment, nothing moved in the Archive hall, and then Washu stepped forward, holding out her hand to the young soldier.

“How old are you, Shouhei?” She asked gently. Shouhei started, staring at her in confusion as he slowly lowered his sword.

“Sixteen summers, miss.” He said, surprised. Washu tut-tutted, shaking her head slowly.

“Where are your parents? You’re no more than a child, doing a man’s job.”

“I am a guard of the Priestess Yuzuha.” Shouhei protested indignantly. “I am… I am…”

“You are scared.” Washu said softly. “You fear for your very life, serving this mistress of yours, don’t you? You talk of killing me, but you’re terrified by the bare idea. Your Priestess of Rikishouki — she is a vengeful mistress.”

“None may speak of the Lady Yuzuha so!” Shouhei fumbled again with his sword, flustered, but Washu merely offered him a smile, plucking the weapon from his grip and examining it. She shrugged, dropping it down on the floor as if it did not interest her, and despite himself, Shouhei took a step away from her.

“Who are you?” He whispered. “What do you want? Answer me! I warn you, Lady Yuzuha…”

“I asked you a question. Where are your family, Shouhei?”

“My family are none of your business.” Shouhei, removed of his weapon, had regressed into the guise of sullen teenage boy, and Tadashi stepped forward, resting his hand on the young man’s shoulder.

“Shouhei’s family are dead. Like mine, they perished in the plague that ravaged several of our towns and villages.” He said quietly. “It was me who brought him into this world, Washu-sama. It’s my fault he’s a boy doing a man’s job — but it’s a way for him to live, and at the time, it was the only option open to him.”

Shouhei's glance darted from scientist to captain, confusion in his gaze, and Washu sighed.

"I see." She murmured. "And you know, Shouhei, what your Priestess would do to Tadashi, if she was angry? Do you think that your Captain would be spared her wrath, if you delivered him to her?"

"I…" Shouhei faltered, biting his lip. Then he shook his head, tears glittering in his blue eyes, and despite herself, a sense of almost maternal sympathy flitted across Washu's senses as she regarded the scared young man that stood before them. He *was*, she realised, just a child, dragged into a dark, dangerous world and for the first time, Mayuka's words resonated with her on a new level.

"It isn't just about her and Tadashi, and some vision of the Eagle." She realised. "It's about people like him — people who have never known freedom. People who have been subjugated and frightened and who have known pain of one nature or another since the day they were born. That is why Mayuka was so keen on me to be their Priestess. Maybe… maybe it's more even than that. Maybe it's why *Father* sought so much for me to follow in his footsteps. Maybe this was what he sought to prevent, in the end — the torture of the Kii without the Hakubi tribe to guide them. I'm realising that, even if Kihaku's death was because of Juraian mining, I still abandoned my people in an unforgivable way. And this… this may be the only chance I ever have to put things even a little bit right."

"Shouhei?" Tadashi murmured softly. "My companion asked you a question. Does your loyalty to me extend enough for you to answer her?"

"I think Lady Yuzuha will kill you." Shouhei admitted softly, blinking back his tears. "I am sorry, Captain. I… I am sorry! I don't want… But I am… I am afraid. She might…"

"She might kill you too." Tadashi said quietly. "It's all right, Shouhei. Calm down. Noone is going to hurt you, I promise."

"Noone is going to hurt anyone." Washu said steadily. "I told you once, Tadashi, I will not condone the spilling of Kii blood in all of this. Not yours, not his. Mayuka wouldn't forgive me if I let you be taken and punished. And I won't forgive myself if I let a boy get harmed because of my being here."

Shouhei stared at her for a moment, his eyes big with alarm.

"You're the one who broke free of Yuzuha-sama's cells." He whispered. "You are the one… aren't you?"

Washu hesitated, then pulled back the hood of her cloak, revealing her face to him fully for the first time. Slowly she nodded.

“My name is Washu Hakubi.” She said softly. “I am the Priestess of Kihaku by blood descent. And I have come to help your people escape Yuzuha’s domination.”

“Ha..Ha… Hakubi?” Shouhei stammered, and Tadashi muttered a curse, grabbing Washu firmly by the arm.

“You were meant to keep incognito. You said yourself that you didn’t want your presence here known until you were ready!” He hissed. Washu shrugged her shoulders.

“I have enough on my conscience for Kihaku’s past.” She said softly. “It’s unfortunate, but he will just have to come with us.”

“But…” Tadashi faltered, and Washu smiled, shaking her head.

“You forget, Tadashi, that I see the true soul of everyone I meet.” She chided. “I know this boy is frightened, but not evil. He is loyal to you, more than he is to Yuzuha. And he will not betray you, if he thinks it will lose you your life. You are his family now. Isn’t that right, Shouhei?”

Shouhei merely stared at her, and Washu smiled, nodding.

“Yes.” She murmured. “I know you are, because I’ve seen it before, in people I’ve been fortunate to meet over the years away from Kihaku. Shouhei, you need not be afraid any longer, I promise.”

She glanced at the scrolls again, scooping up the ones that she wanted, and slipping them into the folds of her cloak. Then she smiled, taking Tadashi’s wrist in one hand and resting the other on Shouhei’s shoulder.

“Hang on tightly.” She warned. “Else I might lose bits of you somewhere in mid-transfer.”

“Mid… what did you say?” Tadashi said sharply, and Washu offered him an innocent smile. Then she closed her eyes, focusing on the dark chamber where the image of her father was painted so vividly on the walls. As she felt the atmosphere shift around her, she was aware of Shouhei’s frightened cry, and the mutter of a prayer under Tadashi’s breath. Then, as she felt the cool stone beneath her feet, she opened her eyes, glancing around her in satisfaction as she loosed her grip on her two companions.

“It’s all right. We’re there. You can open your eyes now.” She said gently, carefully extracting the scrolls and setting them down on the

floor. “We’re safe here.”

“But this is…” Tadashi’s eyes opened wide, and he shook his head slowly. “How? How did you…?”

“I thought you said you believed in your Priestess, Tadashi.” Washu said lightly. Tadashi bit his lip.

“More Hakubi magic.” He breathed. Washu nodded, surprised at the satisfaction that welled up within her at the awed look in his eyes. She turned to Shouhei, who sat huddled on the floor, clutching his knees to his chest as he struggled to steady himself.

“It’s all right. You’re not hurt, and Yuzuha won’t be able to reach you here.” She said gently. “Shouhei, will you open your eyes and look at me? Please?”

Shouhei hesitated, then did as he was bidden, raising his eyes to hers. As he did so, he caught sight of the Priest’s image behind her, the strange torchlight of the chamber giving the Eagle’s wings an eerie glow. His eyes became big, and he stared at Washu, seeing her anew.

“You *are*.” He whispered. “You truly are… Miko-sama, please, forgive me. Forgive me… I…”

He faltered, prostrating himself before her on the ground, and Washu laughed, settling down beside him as she tapped him gently on the shoulder.

“You have done nothing to need my forgiveness.” She said lightly. “And I haven’t asked you to bow to me, so there’s no need for any of that. I’m not here to carry out any kind of vengeance, or to test the faith of those who’ve been under Yuzuha’s control. After all, I’m really in no position to judge those whose belief has strayed from the World and the Hakubi tribe.”

Carefully she lifted him into a sitting position, offering him a kind smile.

“If you stay here, you won’t be in any trouble.” She continued. “Yuzuha is a powerful woman, and I think you probably know more about her than these scrolls do. I may need your help — can I trust you, Shouhei? And more, will you trust in me?”

Shouhei hesitated for a moment, then he nodded his head, and Washu saw something new burn in the young man’s eyes. Instead of fixed determination or despair, there was a flicker of hope, and despite herself, her heart clenched at the sight of it.

“So young, so wretched, yet so keen to believe in salvation.” She

mused. “Did you feel like this, Father, when people begged for your help? I only hope I won’t let them down — I only hope that the Hakubi magic is truly enough to do what I’ve set out to do. I wonder, Father, did you ever get frustrated when the World couldn’t answer your call? No wonder you were angry at my questions, if you didn’t know how to answer them, even to yourself.”

“I will trust you, Miko-sama.” Shouhei spoke now, his tones rich with anticipation. “My mother always said you would come. That it was written… the prophesy would come true. And I will… I will help you. In any way I can.”

Well, so they were gone.

Back at the Archive, Isao slipped cautiously inside the long, narrow chamber, pausing as he registered the fact that it was empty. His brows knitted together as he tried to make sense of what he had heard.

“Shouhei tracked the Captain here.” He murmured, his gaze flickering over the missing scrolls as he did so. “And from what I heard, the Captain wasn’t alone, either. He had someone with him. A woman, it sounded like. A woman who spoke our language… but not like I’ve heard it spoken before. Her intonation — it was different. Almost… almost as if it came from a long time ago. As if she was speaking from the scriptures our ancestors left behind.”

He frowned, clenching his fists in frustration. It had been hard to overhear much of the conversation without revealing his presence, and inwardly he cursed the thickness of the stone walls that had divided him from his quarry.

“But she definitely called herself a Priestess.” He murmured. “And I’m sure I heard her say she was Priestess of Kihaku. Yuzuha-sama will want to know about this. She has long feared the appearance of the traitor Priestess on Rikishouki… I will be well rewarded if I tell her what I know.”

He brushed his finger against the shelf, observing where the dust had been disturbed.

“And wherever they went, however they went… they took some of these with them.” He added. “I must report back to my mistress at once. This missing outsider is no longer as important as the treason the Captain seems to be involved in — and now Shouhei too, it seems, has fallen under this stranger’s spell.”

He turned on his heel, hurrying back through the corridors and hallways towards the chamber where Yuzuha almost always spent her days, saluting to the guard now on duty, who returned the salute almost mechanically, turning to open the door. It creaked back, and with a moment of hesitation, Isao pushed forwards, dropping to his knees in the centre of the room as he made his bow to his mistress.

“You are quickly returned, Isao.” Yuzuha turned from where she had been examining what looked like ancient documents, gesturing for him to rise. “You have news for me already?”

“Yes, my Lady.” Isao bobbed his head forward in a nod. “Priestess, I followed Shouhei, just as you charged me. He was tracking the Captain, Tadashi. They were in the Archive when I came upon them… Mistress, they have disturbed some of the scrolls. I believe some are missing. Some… relating to your time on this planet.”

“I see.” Yuzuha’s eyes narrowed. “And Shouhei and the Captain? Where is Tadashi now?”

“I don’t know, my Lady.” Isao admitted. “They were in the chamber, sure enough, but when I entered, the room was empty. I think it was some kind of evil witchcraft that took them from there to some other place. They were not alone, Priestess. There was a woman with them — a woman who spoke Kii tongue.”

“A woman?” Yuzuha stiffened, and she frowned. “The missing stray, perhaps?”

“I don’t believe so, Yuzuha-sama.” Isao shook his head. “If I may… the traveller did not speak our language. And she was young… about the same age as me. This woman… she spoke in ancient tongue. Her words, her phrases… she called herself the Priestess of Kihaku, in the way of the ancient writings. She claimed to be the one from the legends… the true Priestess of the Kii people.”

Yuzuha was silent for a moment, then she wheeled on her companion, gripping him tightly by the shoulders.

“Who is the true Priestess of this planet, Isao?” She asked, her tones dangerously low. Isao’s eyes widened in fright, and he bit his lip.

“You are, Yuzuha-sama.” He said hurriedly. “I came to report this to you because Captain Tadashi is clearly involved in vile treason and he has now pulled Shouhei into his web of deceit as well. This woman, whoever she is… I thought you should know of it right away. I did not mean…”

“No, I don’t suppose you did.” Yuzuha released her grip, giving him

a little shove so that he stumbled to his knees once more. “You would not have the spine to oppose me, Isao. It’s one of the reasons I choose you to do my bidding. You have enough sense and self-preservation to know who can cause you the most pain, if you should choose to rebel.”

“I would never betray you, Yuzuha-sama.” Isao said quickly. “You are the true Priestess of Rikishouki. Forgive my careless use of words.”

“This time.” Yuzuha said briskly. “As it happens, I have need of you, and besides, this is more important. You have done well to bring this information to my ears, Isao, and for that reason, I will spare your sorry life a little longer. Whoever this woman is, she has no right being here. Even if she claims to be of Kihaku, Kihaku is dead. This world is not for her — and I want her found. This Priestess of Kihaku must be brought into custody and as soon as possible.”

“Yes, Yuzuha-sama.” Isao nodded his head. “And Captain Tadashi? Shouhei?”

“If they are found, kill them. They have both transgressed beyond my forgiveness.” Yuzuha said crisply. “We will make an example of those who choose to disobey divine will.”

“Yes, Mistress.” Isao bowed in acknowledgement of her words. “It will be done. I shall personally organise the search. Wherever they are, I shall find them and bring them to you, Lady Yuzuha. You have my guarantee.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

It wasn't fair.

Tokimi ran on through the trees, tears blinding her vision as she hurried deeper and deeper into the forest. As she ran, Mihoshi's careless remarks flitted through her senses, teasing and confusing her, and at length she stumbled to her knees, burying her head in her arms as she let her tears overwhelm her.

"It isn't true. It can't be." She whispered. "Kihaku is not dead! Tokimi is on Kihaku! I know I am! But… but…"

She frowned, shaking her head to clear it as unbidden images flashed through her mind, confusing and disorientating her.

"*I will not be fooled by the blood of Newcomers. I killed your ancestors, Princess Sasami, and I will kill you too, now I know what earthly form you really take. You're a fool, Tsunami — do you think there's magic enough in a little girl to take down a Priestess who's waited millennia to fight?*"

The strange, unforgiving voice penetrated her senses once again and she jerked her head up at the sound of it, fear reflecting in her sapphire eyes as slowly a scene began to unfold in her mind. The strange steel walls of Washu's first laboratory seemed to loom in around her, as the whole world trembled and shook. Tokimi let out a faint whimper of fright as large cracks began to sear through the thick material, revealing black space all around her. The agonised scream of a spirit in torment wrenched through her senses, striking terror once more into her confused young heart as she felt something grab up inside of her, reaching deep into her soul as it dragged itself free of her body.

She closed her eyes, trying to shut out the images, but instead they became more vivid as a whiteish glow seemed to surround her, pushing against the pain and misery that had seemed to overwhelm her entire being. Around her, the segments of steel and rock were becoming more and more segregated, pushing apart from one another as they shot out into the black night sky. And then, as the pain inside Tokimi's heart seemed to reach breaking point, she saw a spaceship glittering in the darkness, almost translucent in its appearance as something spectral and white reached out towards her.

“No!” Tokimi let out a tremendous scream, clutching at her head, and as she did so, the images dissipated into nothing, fading away as if they had been no more than an unfortunate nightmare. She opened her eyes, breathing hard as she struggled to regain her composure.

“That voice again.” She whispered. “*Tokimi’s* voice? But… what was I seeing? What was that? Kihaku isn’t dead. *This* is Kihaku!”

She scrambled to her feet, brushing the leaf litter from her clothing as she gazed out across the landscape. She had, she realised, run almost entirely through the forest and a clearing was not far ahead, the glimmer of sunlight marking it out amid the densely packed trees. Slowly and carefully she made her way towards it, pausing as she reached the edge to gaze down on what was clearly a village of some kind. A stone rock, not unlike the one outside the temple, marked the name of the place in reassuringly familiar characters, and Tokimi sighed, brushing her fingers over it as she tried to calm her pounding heart.

“This is Kihaku. It *must* be.” She whispered. “Tokimi is home, and so is Washu. So I just have to find her.”

She turned, expecting to see Seiryo and the others behind her, but there was noone there and for the first time Tokimi realised that she was completely alone. Her eyes widened for a moment, and slowly she shook her head.

“Nii-chan has… left Tokimi alone?” She murmured. “But he said… he promised… Tokimi doesn’t want to be alone! And he lied… why did he lie to Tokimi? Why doesn’t he want Tokimi to know this is Kihaku? Why not? Does it have something to do with that voice? What is happening… why are all these things in my head?”

Her lip trembled, as more tears threatened, and she swallowed hard, unsure of how to proceed.

“Nii-chan and Suki were talking about something… something Tokimi must not remember.” She whispered. “Is that why Nii-chan has left Tokimi all alone? Is it? Because Tokimi keeps seeing bad pictures, and hearing bad things?”

She rested her hand on the stone sign-post as a sudden sense of desolation and loneliness washed over her. She frowned, shaking her head.

“But this is Kihaku.” She reminded herself. “Why is Tokimi so sad now? She’s come home. At last, Tokimi is home. So why… why does she want to be with Suki and Nii-chan on Jurai again? This is Kihaku

— so why does Tokimi want to go back?”

“*Tokimi, I’m more than prepared to do what you want me to do*.”

Seiryo’s voice startled her out of her reverie and she swung around, half-expecting to see him standing there. For a moment, an image brushed against her vision, of a man in smart Galaxy Police uniform, his eyes glittering with frustration and madness as he spoke in a cold, impatient manner. Tokimi reached out a hand towards him, a little afraid of his stiff, uncompromising demeanour.

“Nii-chan?”

“*I’ll take the woman out if that’s what it takes. But it would help if you’d at least give me her name!*”

The words chilled Tokimi’s very soul, and she swallowed hard, taking a step or two back from the apparition that faded and vanished before her eyes. He had never been there, she realised, and yet the words that still resonated across her senses still haunted her. Somehow, even though she knew Seiryo had never been there, she knew the words had been real, and that once her beloved adoptive brother had stood there, his eyes cold and empty, speaking those words to her.

She let out a little whimper of horror, dismay flooding her sapphire eyes as her scarred brain struggled to make sense of it.

“Tokimi is a bad person.” She murmured. “That is why! Tokimi made Washu angry, Tokimi said bad things to Sasami, Tokimi made Nii-chan do… do something terrible. Tokimi is… Tokimi is what? Is she a demon? Is that why Nii-chan and Washu always leave her alone? Is that what Nii-chan and Suki don’t want Tokimi to remember? Tokimi… Kihaku… I wish I understood. I wish Washu-neechan was here! I know she’d explain it to me, but… but…”

She frowned.

“Tokimi *must* find Washu-oneechan.” She decided. “Tokimi must! And… and then… and then Tokimi must know if she is a demon. *Tokimi must know*!”

“You know, walking around in a silent sulk isn’t going to help us find Tokimi.”

As Kiyone and her companions moved once more into the forest, the detective turned to her noble ally, casting him a reproving look as she did so. “You do know her better than any of us, Seiryo. How about

you stop walking in grim silence and give us some clues about how to track her down?”

“If I knew any more than you do, I wouldn’t be so worried.” Seiryo said quietly, pushing a heavy tree branch thick with foliage out of his way and holding it back for his two female companions to pass by. “The truth is, I’ve never seen Tokimi quite like this before. I thought when we set down, she’d cheered right up — but I never thought she’d believe we were on Kihaku.”

“Is it totally impossible that we are, do you think?” Mihoshi furrowed her brow as she tried to work things out in her own mind. “I mean, I know Washu blew it up and all that, but could someone have stuck it back together?”

“I don’t think it’s quite that simple to fix a broken planet, Mihoshi.” Kiyone shook her head impatiently. “No, this isn’t Kihaku. Even if the language is the same, it’s not Tokimi or Washu’s planet. Don’t you remember, when we found the Tsubasa, we went past the place Kihaku used to be. It’s not there any more.”

“But it wouldn’t be there, if it were here.” Mihoshi shrugged. “Would it?”

“Planets don’t generally move out of their orbitary cycles.” Seiryo rubbed his chin as he considered. “No, Mihoshi. This is not Kihaku. Washu has told me enough times that that world was destroyed before she saw fit to explode it. That the people died out there a long time ago, thanks to the raging storms and other climatic crises that Tokimi’s Priestess-ship brought on. The planet’s controlling element was damaged and it acted out of its normal routine. Consequently the Kii all died. The same information can be found in the Library on Jurai. After Tokimi first roused up, I took the opportunity to do a little reading about Kihaku’s history. When the Juraians left there, it was already a decaying planet. And that was a long, long time ago. Well into the Old Era. Certainly not within living memory.”

“Except Washu and Tokimi’s memory, of course.” Kiyone frowned. “But Tokimi is easily confused. And if she doesn’t remember anything between her life then and her life now, you can see why she’s jumped to the conclusion she has.”

“Yes. Although it doesn’t really make much sense either way.” Seiryo admitted. “This Kii language is practically dead, after all. Why should we find it here, on such a world as this one? It seems strange.”

“Unless this is all one big weird dream that someone’s having, and we’re not here at all.” Mihoshi suggested, tripping over a tree root and

grabbing hold of Kiyone's arm to prevent from sprawling headlong. "Whoops! Thanks, Kiyone! I almost fell there. If it was a dream, all we'd need to do then is find out whose and wake them up, right? And if only Washu and Tokimi can speak this language…"

"Miho, you're babbling nonsense." Kiyone said sharply. "If this were a dream, do you think we'd be the ones making those kind of decisions? Sometimes I really wonder whether you leave your brain at Headquarters when you come on missions with me. I really do."

"Well, if it was someone's dream, we wouldn't know." Mihoshi said matter-of-factly. "So we might think we're making decisions, but we're not. We might not even be real. The language could be made up. Don't you think it's possible?"

"I think you need your head read." Kiyone sighed.

"But in a sense Mihoshi is correct." Seiryo said pensively. 'A lot of things aren't making sense. I don't think we're in a dream,' As Kiyone opened her mouth to object. "Give me some credit for rationality, at the very least. But something is wrong, here. It has a feeling about it, and I don't like it. All this nature and beauty… yet somehow it doesn't seem quite… real. Do you get that feeling too?"

"In a sense, I suppose." Kiyone acknowledged reluctantly. "But only because we know Washu went missing somewhere on this rock."

"And yet we've seen no people, other than ourselves, since we set down." Seiryo pointed out. "Not even a stray child or a man hard at work on the land. Nothing except buildings that indicate life. Are the people here so afraid to come out? Or are they hiding, waiting to ambush us the way they did Washu? It concerns me. Tokimi is defenceless, and she's far too trusting. We need to find her, and quickly… before someone else does."

"That I do agree with." Kiyone wrestled with a stray branch of an overly friendly tree, nodding her head. "And following these marks she found back through the trees is more difficult than it looks. Do you suppose the path is meant to go both ways?"

"At this rate, we don't even know if Tokimi followed the pathway or not." Seiryo said helplessly. "All we can do is try, and hope she hasn't got very far."

"At least she can read the language. Maybe if she can read it, she'll also be able to speak to the people here." Kiyone suggested. "They might not hurt her, if they think she's one of them."

"She isn't, though." Seiryo said tiredly. "Because however you look

at it, and whatever theory you raise, this is not Kihaku. The Kii people are dead. They will surely know that Tokimi is not one of their kind."

"Perhaps she is. Perhaps Kii people did survive, beyond Kihaku's death." Kiyone mused. "You never know."

"How?" Seiryo demanded. "There's no logic in that idea. We're talking about a planet without any means for space travel."

"But Kii people married into Juraian families, didn't they?" Kiyone demanded. "When those kids were hassling Tokimi, when I was on Jurai and we were unravelling Yugi's file — I distinctly remember one of the brats saying something about being descended from Kii folk. If he was, surely others must be?"

"Yes, but that's a far cry from suggesting an entire race of extinct people actually survived when they had no means to leave their dying world." Seiryo said frankly. "Those who married into Juraian families became Juraian. They learned about Jurai's culture, were educated, and became a part of our world. They would not have been recogniseable Kii. They would have learnt Old Era Juraian, and eventually their native ways would have been lost. That's how these things work. There are many people living on Jurai who, many generations back, may not have been born Juraian. But each considers him or herself a part of our world now. They have become Juraian over time — and such is the fate of the migrant Kii."

"Well, what if you're wrong?" Kiyone pursed her lips, running her finger over the trunk of a marked tree as she did so. "What if not all of them did do that?"

"You still haven't explained the lack of space technology."

"No, I know, but at least it's better than the dream theory, or imagining someone glued Kihaku back together and magically brought it back to life." Kiyone sighed.

"Perhaps, but it isn't helping us find Tokimi."

"We could try shouting for her." Mihoshi suggested. "Then she might hear us, and come."

"So might anyone else watching and listening." Seiryo pointed out. "And I do not wish to attract attention to her, if she is nearby. She has no protection, after all."

"What about her eagle? Doesn't she have that?" Mihoshi looked surprised. Seiryo shook his head.

"That Eagle was Kihaku's, Mihoshi. It possessed Tokimi, just like it

possessed me. The Eagle is gone, and so is any residual magic Tokimi ever had. Besides that, her brain was damaged when the magic was taken out of her. She's vulnerable — like a child — and it worries me. I promised Suki I'd take care of her, and I promised Tokimi I'd not leave her alone again. As it stands I'm breaking promises all around and I *do not like it*."

He clenched his fists, fighting his temper at this, and Kiyone glanced at him, absorbing the tension in his body as she did so.

"We will find her, Seiryo." She said softly. "There are three of us and only one of her."

"I hope you're right." Seiryo said darkly.

"Hey, look! I see a way out of the woods, Kiyone!" Mihoshi let out an exclamation at that moment, pointing eagerly ahead of them, and as Kiyone followed her friend's exuberant gesture, she nodded, relief flickering in her eyes as she spied open terrain.

"No kidding." She murmured. "Well, that's got to be a good sign. With all these trees, we can't hope to see anything beyond a few feet. But on open grassland — Tokimi's dressed in white and gold. Surely we'll be able to pick her out against all this greenery?"

"Let's hope so." Seiryo nodded, hastening forward. As he reached the edge of the woodland, however, he froze, causing Kiyone to almost run straight into him and Mihoshi to tumble awkwardly over her friend's legs.

"Seiryo, what in hell are you doing? You need brake lights!" Kiyone hauled her partner upright, casting the nobleman a glare, but Seiryo shook his head, holding up his hand to indicate they should be quiet. Kiyone's brow furrowed, and cautiously she inched forward, being careful not to make any noise as she came to stand at his shoulder. Once there, she could see what had made him halt and she bit her lip, observing the neat, organised line of figures as they made their way purposefully across the landscape.

"Soldiers." She whispered. Seiryo nodded grimly.

"I think we found our native people." He agreed, his words little more than a breath on the wind. "Stay where you are. Don't move or make a sound — we don't know if they're armed or not."

"Why, what are you going to do?" Kiyone's eyes opened wide as she realised her companion was poised to dart from his leafy cover out into open sight, and she grabbed him by the arm, hauling him forcibly back into the woodland. "Don't be insane! What use are you to

Tokimi, if you get yourself caught!”

“Let me go, you wretched woman, I’m not going to draw that much attention to myself!” Seiryo snapped, attempting to pull himself free of her grip, but she held on fast. “I just want a better view of what’s happening. I want to see what’s going on — whether or not they’ve found Tokimi, and if so, whether I can reach her before anyone can see me.”

“You’re not super-human, though your ego seems to border on it on occasion.” Kiyone retorted. “We don’t have Ryoko here to teleport across distance and back again quickly enough to escape their notice. Will you stop and think for a moment, you moron? These people incapacitated Washu in a split-second. She has a lot of magic to protect her, and you have nothing but your little light-up sword. I’m sorry, but you’re not going anywhere until we know what we’re dealing with. Tokimi or no Tokimi, it’s too much of a risk.”

“If you both keep arguing, they’re going to come over here, you know.” Mihoshi put in at that moment, and at her unusually common-sense observation, both Detective and nobleman turned from where their spat had been slowly increasing in volume. “Didn’t you say we should be quiet, or something? ’Cause you two really aren’t very good at it.”

Despite herself, Kiyone flushed red, casting Seiryo a mutinous glance, which the nobleman ignored, finally managing to free himself from her grasp. He glanced out once more towards the place where the soldiers had been, but there was no longer any sign of them, and he sighed, shaking his head.

“Now we don’t know where they’re going, whether they have Tokimi, or anything at all about them.” He said angrily. “Kiyone, you’re a law enforcement agent. You know that sometimes taking risks can break a case. This is stupid — I could have found out something.”

“Basic training, level one.” Kiyone said frankly. “Always ensure the safety of any accompanying officers when undertaking a dangerous mission.”

“I wouldn’t have been in any danger!”

“You don’t know that.” Kiyone returned. “I told you before, you’re not invincible. You saw a friend die on Yousai, because he was impulsive and he didn’t think before he acted. Suki wouldn’t forgive you for following in his footsteps, you know. We’ll find Tokimi. But we won’t find her by you getting yourself killed or maimed by people who, as it stands, we don’t even know how to communicate with.”

“Then what do *you* suggest we do, Detective Know-it-all?” Seiryo demanded, his tone rich with sarcasm, and Kiyone could tell his temper was bubbling up inside of him, fired by his anxiety over Tokimi’s welfare as well as the frustration of his helpless situation. “What do *you* think will help us find out where Tokimi is?”

Kiyone frowned for a moment, pondering the question seriously. Her initial flippant, sharp retort died on her lips as she read the true emotion in her companion’s malachite gaze and she sighed, spreading her hands.

“Ryoko said something that might help us.” She acknowledged at length. “About pirates and hiding things in plain sight.”

“Meaning?” Seiryo looked impatient.

“Well, we should try and do the same.” Kiyone shrugged. “If you want to go out there — heck, if any of us are going to do any exploring, we need to look a lot less suspicious than we do now. At the moment, we couldn’t be more distinctive. We need to blend in.”

“You mean, disguise ourselves?” Mihoshi looked surprised. “Like, you know, undercover stuff?”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Kiyone agreed. “If we looked more like, well, whoever it is that lives here, then we might be able to find Tokimi more quickly.”

She glanced at Seiryo, reading his expression, and offering him a slight smile.

“If you are agreeable, Lord Tennan.” She added softly. Seiryo started, then grimaced at her.

“All right.” He said frankly. “I take your point and I apologise. I’m worried about her, that’s all. And I still think you underestimate my ability to be stealthy. I wasn’t an Elite agent for all those years without learning something about such things.”

“But right now you’re not thinking entirely rationally.” Kiyone said calmly. “Your decisions when people you consider family are in danger haven’t always shown good judgement — as we both know to our own costs.”

“Perhaps this is true.” Seiryo acknowledged reluctantly. “But even so, I’m not helpless and I certainly don’t want to be protected by…”

He faltered, and Kiyone raised her eyebrow.

“By a woman?” She asked pointedly. “By an inferior officer? By

someone of common blood? Fill in the blank for me — I'm not sure I understand your reasoning."

"By someone whose life I swore never to put in danger again." Seiryo said quietly, and inwardly Kiyone regretted the harshness of her words as she registered a faint flicker of hurt cross her companion's face. "That's all. I would not insult you on any of those levels, Kiyone. I may be an arrogant Juraian Lord in your eyes, but I do have my limits."

"You know, for two people who are supposed to be friends now, you two sure do argue a lot." Mihoshi said pensively. "Are we going to sit here in the trees all day or what? Because I have a really itchy branch poking me in the back and I'd really like to move if it's all the same to you."

"Don't worry. We're moving." Kiyone gathered her wits, shooting her friend a rueful smile. "Before those people come back. I think I spy houses — or something like houses — clustered at the bottom of this rise. With any luck, if we're careful, we might find something there that we can use to disguise ourselves better. The guards were moving away from that location, so if I'm right, we should be quite safe."

"And in case you're not right, we'll be armed and prepared for any trouble that comes our way." Seiryo said quietly. Kiyone turned to stare at him, and the lord patted the hilt of his sword, offering her a wry grin.

"Basic training, level two." He said simply. "Never enter a risky situation unarmed."

"Right." Despite herself, Kiyone returned the grin with one of her own. "So shall we go, then? Mihoshi — you have your blaster, right?"

"Yes, it's right here." Mihoshi agreed, reaching to pull it from the holster, but Kiyone held up her hands.

"No, it's all right. We don't need a demo." She said hastily. "Just knowing you have it is good enough — we don't want to draw any attention to ourselves if we can help it, and I know you. Most likely you'll manage to set the entire forest on fire somehow — discretion isn't exactly one of your strong points."

"Well, noone at Headquarters has ever *trained* me to be discreet." Mihoshi said unconcernedly. "So I guess it doesn't matter. But I have my gun, so we'll be fine. You can both count on me."

"Then let's make our move." Seiryo said quietly. "And hope we reach Tokimi before those men do."

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

"Well, at least you made it back safely."

Mayuka pulled her rough wrap more tightly around her shoulders, settling herself on the floor of the temple-like underground chamber as she cast her companions a doubtful look. "But Tadashi, I thought you said you were safe. Now it's clear that Yuzuha knows something is going on — and more, you brought one of your men down here, too? You were the one advising me on discretion — what's going on?"

"That was my decision, Mayuka. Not Tadashi's." Washu interjected softly, sending the shivering, anxious Shouhei a sidelong glance. "He's just a boy, wrapped up in all of this. I've seen too many children forced into roles they shouldn't be in my lifetime. I don't want to make him another one."

"Well, now there's no way he can go back up there." Mayuka grimaced, shuffling into a more comfortable position. "Now he really knows too much — what if he runs to Yuzuha and tells her everything? He is one of her men, Tadashi. Just like you were, before I broke the spell over you with the meteorite."

"Shouhei isn't our enemy, Mayuka." Washu said comfortably. "His young heart is confused, but it isn't evil. He's lonely and frightened and more, he's fond of Tadashi. I don't think he would endanger the life of someone he considers like a brother. Not when it came down to it."

"I…" Shouhei faltered, gazing up at the Priestess falteringly, then, "In the other chamber, you looked… but how is it possible? Can you… can you truly be the legendary one written about so long ago? You have the look of it, but… is it *really* true? Can you really be so old as that?"

"Well, whether or not I'm legendary has yet to be seen." Washu laughed ruefully. "But my name is Washu Hakubi, and my father was the last Priest of Kihaku. Those are things I can't escape from — so yes, in that sense, I am who Tadashi says I am."

"Washu Hakubi." Shouhei murmured the name to himself, a slight smile touching his lips. He raised his gaze to hers, something sparkling in their depths.

“Eagle Feather of the Hakubi Tribe.” He murmured. “That’s what your name means, isn’t it?”

“Yes, more or less.” Washu looked startled. “Hakubi-no-Washuu… I suppose you could translate it that way. I haven’t done so for a long time, though. I’ve been corrupted, if you like, by outside forces — whose letters don’t represent the things that Kii ones do. But you know your characters then, Shouhei? You can read even the ancient script that some of your fellows can’t?”

“Yes, Lady.” Shouhei nodded. “My father was a historian — he was in charge of keeping records and interpreting old papers for many, many years, and so were his ancestors before him. I was his oldest son, and he wanted me to follow his example — he said that the past was as important as the future when building a strong, healthy world. He knew his letters and so taught me and… and my brother and sister too. He wanted us to understand… to know about Kihaku, as well as Rikishouki.”

He made a gesture of remembrance and Washu’s gaze softened as she rested a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“They would be proud to know you were here now.” She said lightly. “But that’s good to know. In which case, I’m sure you can help me understand the scrolls detailing Yuzuha’s time here on Rikishouki — it might well be that your father had a hand in penning some of them, in which case you’ll be able to decipher the handwriting more easily than I can, I’m sure. The characters are familiar to me, and the carved ones on stone tablets resemble those I remember learning as a child. However, on these new documents the writing is closely woven together and occasionally uses constructions I don’t fully understand. Your spoken language reflects mine quite closely, but you’ve developed writing beyond the characters of Kihaku and I might need assistance getting a clear picture of what’s been written down.”

“I will do whatever I can to assist you, Miko-sama.” Shouhei said gravely.

“Are you sure we can trust him?” Mayuka looked doubtful. “Even if he is a friend of Tadashi’s… Washu-sama, are you certain?”

“Quite certain.” Washu smiled. “Beneath his ugly uniform beats a very loyal heart, Mayuka. Don’t worry. He has made his choice — Shouhei will not betray us.”

“And you? What about *you*?” Shouhei turned his gaze on Mayuka, a faint flicker of resentment stirring in his gaze at her doubt. “Who are you and why are you hiding here, beneath the ground where the

bodies of our ancestors sleep?”

“It’s not safe for me to be up there.” Mayuka said simply. “My family were already killed by Yuzuha, because I’m descended from Masoto-sama’s line. I’m the last one left… and if I stay here, well, so far she hasn’t found me. I hope she never will.”

She sent the youngster a pointed glance at this, and Shouhei bristled, folding his arms.

“Just because I’m sixteen doesn’t mean I’m unreliable.” He said hotly. “Besides, now that I’m here with you… now that I am…”

“Yuzuha will soon know, and if she didn’t have a good idea of my treachery before, she will now.” Tadashi said frankly. “Yours, too. So yes, Shouhei, you’re right. You’re as much at risk from Yuzuha’s wrath now as Mayuka or I are.”

“There’s nothing to be scared of, though.” Mayuka added slowly. “Not so long as Washu-sama is here. I had a dream… the Eagle sent me pictures and when I met Washu-sama, I knew they were true. That at long last our Priestess had come to save us and set us free, just like the stories predicted she would.”

Shouhei frowned, shuffling himself into a defensive, uncertain position as his gaze roved around his companions anew. Glancing at him, Washu once more had the impression of a scared young boy forced too soon into the role of warrior, and a flash of anger flooded through her at the way Yuzuha had so deftly manipulated his young heart.

“Yuzuha uses magic to control her people, doesn’t she?” She said softly. “Its a terrible way to exert domination — to do it through fear. It’s true that I have magic, and I intend to use it. But I would never control someone else’s heart and will the way Yuzuha has. If you are afraid to face her again, Shouhei, you don’t have to leave this place until after the matter is settled. I promised myself that I wouldn’t let any Rikishouki blood be spilled in this, and I meant it. You are safe beneath the ground here, under Yuzuha’s feet. And I won’t think badly of you, if you choose to stay here.”

She glanced briefly at Tadashi, then,

“Not everyone is born with the blood of warrior Kii running through their veins.”

Shouhei looked startled for a moment. Then he shook his head, scrambling to his feet.

“You are the Priestess. If… if that is truly so, then I have to follow you and serve you, no matter what. Even if that means fighting.” He said stolidly. “My father said that was the way of Kihaku, and that’s how he taught me to be. If you really *are* the daughter of Kihaku’s Priest, then… then you are my true mistress, not Yuzuha-sama. And I have to do what I have to do.”

“Then you really do believe us? Now it’s had a chance to sink in a little?” Tadashi asked apprehensively. Shouhei hesitated, then he nodded his head.

“Not many people have been kind to me since my family died, Captain, but you have.” He said simply. “And you don’t lie to me. So if you believe in her, so do I. If you think this is right… then I do too. Besides, like I said, she had the look of it, in the other chamber. Shadowed by the image of the Hakubi Priest, I could see it — the same look on her face. And Captain, I really didn’t want to hurt you. Or you to hurt me. Lady Yuzuha suspects you of plotting against her already… I didn’t want to be the one to deliver you to death.”

“I’m glad about that.” Tadashi grinned, slapping the boy amiably on the shoulder. “Then we should stop talking and start planning what we’re going to do. Washu-sama, do the scrolls you have give you anything you can work with?”

“Maybe, but I’d rather hear Shouhei talk about Yuzuha first.” Washu admitted. “He obviously knows her and her ways better than any written document, and if Yuzuha suspects you, Tadashi, then the boy might know more.”

“I could go back.” Shouhei volunteered. “I could spy on her, and then…”

“No.” Washu held up her hands. “I told you. No blood spill. I won’t risk your life, Shouhei. Lord knows enough Kii have died for freedom as it is.”

“Then I’ll try and tell you what you want to know.” There was a flicker of relief in the young boy’s eyes at this, and he nodded, leaning back against the wall as he did so. “If I can.”

“Yuzuha dislikes bright sunlight, I already know that.” Washu said thoughtfully. “And she has some kind of magical control over those around her — I’ve seen that for myself.”

“Not exactly.” Shouhei glanced at his hands. “It’s not a spell, exactly. We’re not under her control like that. But…”

“Yuzuha takes out all the meaning from our lives, so that we only

serve her will." Tadashi explained quietly. "The people you've seen, Washu-sama, they aren't mindless drones or slaves in the way you think. But Yuzuha is capable of toying with people's hearts — suppressing important memories and thoughts that connect us to the world outside her palace."

"And she used this on you, Shouhei, when she sent you to find Tadashi and I?" Washu asked quietly. Shouhei shook his head.

"No. She just sent me." He realised. "She didn't… she just gave me an order."

Tadashi's eyes narrowed.

"Which means she knew Shouhei wouldn't kill me." He muttered. "She's not a fool… it might have been a trap."

"A trap?" Alarm flickered in Shouhei's expression. "You mean that I…?"

"A trap of what nature, Tadashi?" Washu asked quizzically. "You think that Shouhei's mission was a distraction — that something else was going on at the same time?"

"More likely some*one* else." Tadashi said grimly. "There are people on Rikishouki who lack spine and courage, and seek only the patronage of the Priestess because she is powerful and can make them so. I imagine that Shouhei was not the only one she sent out to do her bidding… it's very possible she had him followed. And more, that she sent him in particular, knowing that he and I are friends."

"So she might know about this place?" Mayuka looked frightened, but Washu shook her head.

"Even if Tadashi is right, I teleported us all here." She said evenly. "Unless she has a way to anticipate the direction of my magic, her spy will have found a dead end. It's all right, Mayuka. I think we're safe enough here."

"I'm glad you're with us, Washu-sama." Mayuka sighed, glancing absently at her wrists. "And that the Eagle sent you when she did."

"That reminds me." Washu frowned. "Didn't one of you tell me that the meteor from Kihaku's core blocked Yuzuha's influence?"

"Yes." Mayuka looked startled, reaching down to touch her bracelet. "Why? Do you need this now?"

"No, but a chip of the rock might do for Shouhei, to protect him from hereon in." Washu shook her head. "I know Tadashi wears a

pendant of it, and it seems to work for him."

"Oh, of course." Mayuka nodded. "I guess we could chip some off the statue… I mean, do you think that the Eagle would understand, if we did?"

"I've a better idea." Tadashi shook his head, slipping his own pendant from around his neck and striking it cleanly against the cold stone of the floor. It cracked down the centre, and as he struck it again, the glittering blue-black stone split cleanly into two pieces. He grinned, holding out the loose shard to the youngster, who took it uncomprehendingly.

"Thread it with cord from your uniform, and wear it beneath your vest." He said quietly. "It will keep you safe. Washu-sama says it's a relic from Kihaku — a piece of the Eagle's own soul."

"A piece… of the Eagle?" Shouhei gazed at the fragment anew, then nodded, working loose a piece of cord from the edging of his uniform and carefully hooking it around the rough edge of his piece of stone. "Then I'll surely wear it, if that's true."

"Washu-sama, I don't understand completely how it is you've survived so long as you have, or why you still look not much older than I am, even now." Mayuka reflected pensively. "But the Eagle must have meant you to come here. In some way, somehow — he must have known that you'd be needed, and so preserved your life. Even beyond the death of his world."

Washu looked startled, then she smiled.

"Perhaps you are right." She said lightly. "It's strange, really. I've never fully fitted in in the world outside. I'm interested in so many things and I've been involved in so much — and yet in other ways I've always been a spectator. Even when I found love…"

She hesitated, fingering the gold pendant that hung around her neck, then shrugged.

"Even though I loved him, when I think about it in those terms, maybe I wasn't ever meant to marry and settle down like a normal person can." She acknowledged, speaking more to herself than her companions as Mikamo's face flooded her memories. "I haven't aged, its true. I might never have aged. It might have become impossible, eventually, to even be together. In some respects, I've always been like that. On the outside, looking in. Never quite knowing where I fit."

"Well, you can always belong here, you know." Tadashi said with a grin. "As Mayuka said, this is where you should be, after all. You

speak our language, you are our Priestess. You have a place here on Rikishouki and you know that we need you. More than we ever have, probably. You've given us hope for the future, and that's something that's not easily done in an environment so full of fear."

"Maybe." Washu shrugged. "It's true that I've spent a long time fighting my identity and my destiny. And I've become involved with my family, but in a sense, I'm not really needed there, either. My daughter will be married, and she doesn't need her mother always butting into her life… not now she's grown and with very particular ideas of her own, too. I'm still a little bit in limbo, if the truth be told. Perhaps this is why. Perhaps in some weird way I was always going to be the Priestess — whether I realised it or not."

"That's no bad thing to be." Mayuka dimpled. "Tadashi is right. We want you, even if nowhere else does. So you will stay with us, won't you? You will help us to free ourselves and rebuild our world, when Yuzuha is gone?"

"I… I don't know, yet." Washu sighed. "I guess… perhaps. I'll see. We don't know yet how things will go, after all. But…"

She faltered, biting her lip as she considered all the possibilities.

"Tenchi and Ryoko haven't come." She realised. "And really, there's no reason why they should do. In a sense, this *is* my destiny. The one Father chose for me, so long ago. What he'd think now, I don't know — but in a way I feel he'd want me to stay with these people. To try and do the things he failed to do. I've never thought of Father in such a way before, but maybe I am beginning to understand — the sacrifices he made, the ones Tokimi made… maybe now it's my turn to make those choices. After all, people's lives here may depend on me… and you can't say that about the planet Earth. Strange as it may seem, perhaps I *do* belong here on Rikishouki. Perhaps time will come around full circle — maybe this is the future I was meant to find all along!"

The village seemed deserted at first glance, and as Tokimi descended the hillside, glancing all around her, she was struck by how eerily familiar the whole layout appeared. Thin trails of smoke drifted from stone-curved chimney holes in the thatched roofing of a couple of properties, and Tokimi frowned, remembering when she had been a small girl in a place not so very different from this one.

"With Washu-neechan, playing between the houses." She mused. "There were always children playing… always children. So where are

the children now? Are they all gone? Or do they hide from Tokimi? Do they know… can they tell that Tokimi is bad?”

She bit her lip, fighting against the tears that longed to fall as she cast a futile gaze behind her to see if Seiryo and his companions had caught her up. She was quite alone, however, with only a bird perched precariously on the village’s stone-marker any indication of life. She glanced at the bird, then sighed. It was like no other species she had seen before, and for the first time her conviction began to waver.

“Is this really my home?” She murmured. “But it must be — where else can it be? I wish I understood. Where is Washu-neechan? If she is here, she must be here because it’s Kihaku. Father said she would be the Priestess. Why else would she come here? Father is dead, and so was the World, but if the World wasn’t dead after all — Washu-neechan would have to come back to it. Wouldn’t she?”

Her brow creased in consternation, as snippets of the long-ago argument teased at her senses once more.

“Tokimi is… Priestess?” She whispered. “But Tokimi is Inoue. Tokimi can’t be Priestess… that’s not right!”

“Who are you?”

At that juncture, a voice penetrated her musings, and she glanced down, realising that she was being watched by a young girl of no more than ten years. The child was eying her strangely, and Tokimi tilted her head on one side, bewildered by the odd expression. That she had been remonstrating with herself out loud in a mixture of Galactic Tongue and Kii had completely passed her by, and the girl could be forgiven for thinking that she had encountered a wandering mad-woman.

“I said who are you?” The child repeated her question, putting her hands on her hips and glaring at Tokimi defiantly. From behind her, a gaggle of younger children watched fearfully, clearly relying on the defence of this oldest sibling to resolve the problem, but at the sight of the juveniles Tokimi’s eyes lit up with eager pleasure.

“Children!” She exclaimed. “You *are* here!”

She hurried forward, keen to greet her new acquaintances, but the ten year old thrust herself between them once more, grabbing up a broken stick from the ground and brandishing it in Tokimi’s direction.

“Strangers aren’t welcome here.” She said, making a peculiar gesture of protection as she did so, and Tokimi’s eyes widened as she interpreted the action as a defence against demonic possession. “If you

touch my brothers or my sister I'll poke your eyes out with this stick so stay away from them!"

"But I…" Tokimi faltered, hurt and confusion marring her expression as she took a hesitant step back. "I don't want to hurt them. I just… I want to say hello. That's all. I'm looking for my sister."

"Taiko, stand back." A man's voice interrupted the conversation as a brawny, roughly dressed man lumbered out of the nearby dwelling, grabbing the young girl by the arm and pulling her forcibly back behind him. She bristled at this rough treatment, but at a glance from him she obediently backed off, hurrying to comfort the smallest of the other children who had begun to cry at all the commotion. Tokimi looked stricken, taking another step back as the man rounded on her, bearing down on her with a nasty glint in his ochre eyes.

"Who are you and what is your business with my daughter?" He asked softly. "Answer me, or be sorry you came this way!"

"I… I…" Tokimi faltered, tears welling in her eyes at the coolness of his tones. "I'm looking for my sister. I'm looking for… for Washu."

"I don't know any Washus, and nor do they, so get lost with you." The man growled, giving her a shove back towards the pathway that ran through the centre of the village, and Tokimi suddenly became aware that other people had emerged silently from their homes, watching the exchange with cool, impassive expressions. "You wear the dress of a stranger, and we don't trust strangers in this part. Leave, before you're made to leave. I won't warn you twice."

"But I…" Tokimi's eyes widened in dismay. "I don't want to hurt anyone! I'm looking for my sister. She's the Priestess. The Priestess Washu. I must find her."

At her words, silence fell over the gathering, and the man faltered, staring at her with fear in his eyes.

"What did you say, wench?" He demanded. "Answer me — what did you say?"

"There is no Priestess Washu." Another man said, pushing to the front of the gathering as he did so. "The girl's out of her wits, Hayashi-san. Can't you see it in her eyes? She's a half-wit, a mindless fool. Give her a clip around the ear and send her on her way — there's no reasoning with her kind."

"But… but my sister is the Priestess. My sister is…" Tokimi protested. "Father was the Priest, the Priest of Kihaku. And…"

“Shut up, before you say something that will get people killed.” The first man, who Tokimi now knew was called Hayashi grabbed her firmly by the arms, causing her to wince and cry out in pain at the roughness of his touch. “The Priestess is Lady Yuzuha and this world is Rikishouki. It’s treason to mention any other Priest’s name and treason to talk about the dead world Kihaku. You’ll have us all burnt at the stake at this rate — silence your mad tongue or we’ll silence it for you!”

“Tokimi isn’t mad!” Tokimi wrenched free of his grip, staring at him with a mixture of horror and anger as she fully digested his cold words. “Tokimi is right! Tokimi remembers Kihaku. She remembers it!”

“Tokimi?”

A woman pushed through the crowd at this juncture, and at her words, the villagers parted, some bowing their heads in deference to her. She took no notice of them, however, heading straight across to where the bewildered Tokimi stood, and meeting her gaze with a cool copper one of her own.

“Did you say the name Tokimi, maiden?” She asked softly. There was a low muttering from the gathered villagers, as some made protective signs against evil and other shuffled back away from the dirt trackway where the two women now stood facing one another. Tokimi looked puzzled, but she nodded her head.

“Yes.” She agreed.

The woman eyed her carefully, taking in her appearance. Tokimi’s cream and gold robes had been torn and dirtied by the rush through the trees, her thick brown hair loosed from its ribbons and flowing wild and free around her face. Her unusual, two-tone sapphire eyes stared back, filled with a mixture of confusion and fear as tears still glittered on her dark lashes. The woman frowned, then slowly, she shook her head.

“Where are you from, stranger?” She asked softly.

“Kihaku.” Tokimi looked startled. “Here. Like you.”

“This is not Kihaku.” The woman shook her head again. “Kihaku is dead. Tell me the truth. Who are you and why do you invoke the names of dead Priestesses, dressed like a heathen to the World you walk on?”

“Tokimi is *not* a heathen!” This was too much even for Tokimi’s gentle temperament and she put her hands on her hips, eyes flashing

with sudden anger. “Tokimi is an Inoue loyal to the Eagle and raised by the Priest of Kihaku! Tokimi is *not* dead and… and nor is Washu! Tokimi is a Kii and this is Tokimi’s home! So stop shouting at me and being mean! I don’t like it. *I don’t like it*!”

More silence, and the uniformed woman’s eyes widened as she understood the implications of her companion’s words.

“You speak Kii.” She whispered. “But your accent is not of Rikishouki. You use our words, but your construction is unlike anything in our spoken language. You speak like an ancient text, and you say… you speak the names of Priestesses long past — a world long dead to the people here. Are you claiming to *be* Tokimi-sama, maiden? Is that who you believe you are?”

“Tokimi is my name.” Tokimi looked bewildered. “Tokimi of the Inoue.”

More murmurings, and the woman’s brows knitted together. She muttered something under her breath that Tokimi could not quite catch then, without warning, she grabbed her companion tightly around the wrists, meeting her gaze with dark, almost empty copper eyes.

“Yuzuha-sama must learn of this.” She said darkly. “Half-wit you might be, and wasting our time, but the Priestess did say that any stranger was to be apprehended and brought before her judgement. She has been seeking a strange young woman — perhaps you are she, perhaps not, but I will not let you roam free. You will face the Priestess’s mercy, and you had better pray for your life, maiden. You had best hope you are lost in madness, because if you are not…”

She trailed off forebodingly, and despite herself, Tokimi felt a shiver of fear run down her spine.

“No!” She exclaimed, struggling to pull free, but her captor’s thick-fabric uniform hid a well-honed body, and she did not release her grasp. “No! Let me go! Let me go! I must find Washu-neechan! I must find Nii-chan! I must find them! Let me go!”

“Hayashi, you have done well to apprehend an enemy of Rikishouki’s peace.” The woman cast flinty eyes on the brawny peasant, offering him a cool smile. “Leave her to me now. I shall ensure she causes you no further trouble.”

Hayashi hesitated for a moment, glancing at the still-struggling Tokimi as she became more and more hysterical. Then he bowed low before the member of Yuzuha’s guard, nodding his head.

“Thank you, Lady. Our village is loyal to the Priestess. We are always honoured to serve her will.”

“See that it remains so.” The officer’s eyes glittered with something that struck terror into Tokimi’s heart anew, and she felt the brief brush of a demon’s touch against her own skin. She screamed out, trying again to free herself but the woman’s nails clawed into her skin, preventing her from doing any more than digging deep grooves in her arms and drawing blood.

“This way, and stop fighting. Your fate will only be worse that way.” Was all her captor said in the way of comfort, dragging her forcibly away from the village houses and towards a small stone square building that stood at the very edge of the settlement. “You are either a half-wit or you are Lady Yuzuha’s enemy. Which you are will be for her to decide.”

She gave Tokimi a rough shove into the tiny shelter, binding her arms tightly with thick, coarse rope as she ensured her prey could not escape.

“Nii-chan! Nii-chan, where are you!” Tokimi screamed, struggling against the bonds as she yelled for her beloved protector in Galactic Tongue, and her chaperone seemed unnerved by the sound of strange words, slapping her prey across the face as she ordered her to be quiet.

“I won’t listen to spells or incantations from the likes of you, so be quiet else I’ll make you be!” She threatened. “You will be silent else I will hurt you here and now, do you understand me? Save your dark thoughts and words for the Priestess’s judgement. I do not wish to hear any more from you.”

Tokimi stared at her, bewildered, tears still streaming down her face, but the stinging shock of the slap had brought her enough to her senses to realise that no matter how loudly she shouted, Seiryo was not going to come to her rescue. She closed her eyes, trying to quell the panic as she heard her companion yell orders to an unseen accomplice to prepare the cart for transport. Her heart skipped a beat as she struggled to make sense of everything she had heard.

“Yu Zu Ha.” She murmured the syllables softly, shaking her head in frustration as she did so. “I don’t understand! Tokimi… Washu… if Washu is not the Priestess, where is she? And Tokimi… do these people all know about something Tokimi did? Is that why they hate her? Do they know about the bad thing Tokimi can’t remember… is that why they want to hurt her?”

She shivered, huddling herself into a ball as she waited fearfully for her captor to return.

“Is Tokimi going to die now?” She wondered aloud, but there was noone to answer her question and, as she sat there, fear and desolation overtook her. No matter how she tried, she could not understand why they should treat her so roughly, but the action reminded her of harsh words spoken in what seemed like another lifetime, and she struggled to bring her hands to her head, trying to shut them out.

“No.” She whimpered. “Tokimi doesn’t want to remember. Tokimi doesn’t want to know! Tokimi wants Nii-chan and Washu and to go home to Jurai! Tokimi doesn’t want to be on Kihaku any more… *Tokimi wants to go home*!”

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

"This planet looks like something out of a history text book."

As Ryoko and Tenchi made their way cautiously across the grassland towards the small gathering of buildings the pirate had observed from above, Tenchi cast a glance around him, a rueful smile touching his lips. "If I didn't know better, I'd think this was a weird dream based on too much Art History study. Except that I know from experience that my real life tends to be stranger than my dreams, on balance."

"Now we're here, I'm even more confused about where we are, but I'm pretty sure it's all real." Ryoko said quietly, kicking idly at a stone that had strayed onto the uneven path. "Ryo Ohki's picking up a lot of things that she recognises too, Tenchi. She's pretty sure we're near to where Washu was taken prisoner. We need to be on our guard — there might be people waiting for us, too."

"Right." Tenchi nodded, casting Ryo Ohki a grin. "Ryo Ohki, you'll tell us if you smell people approaching, won't you?"

Ryo Ohki yowled her agreement, flicking her feathery ears as if to illustrate her point, and Ryoko smiled.

"I'm glad we have you on our team." She said softly. "Much better than that stupid, arrogant Lord."

"You really don't like Seiryo Tennan much, do you?" Tenchi remarked. Ryoko snorted.

"And I suppose he's your best buddy now?" She challenged. "This is the guy who abducted you, who attacked the nightclub in Osaka — which, incidentally, you lost college friends over, if you hadn't forgotten. This is the guy who tried to kill Mihoshi and Kiyone both on separate occasions. No, I don't like him much. He might be reformed, but I still don't wholly trust him. He's far too stuck on his own interests for my liking. I don't like his attitude — he irritates me."

"I don't hold a grudge over things that are both past and beyond his control." Tenchi said sensibly. "And as for being arrogant, well, on balance, he could be a lot worse. You've been to Jurai's court as much as I have, if not more. You can't pretend he's the worst. It's probably

as much a survival instinct as your habit of blasting first and asking questions later. Different people develop different defence mechanisms growing up in dangerous environments. And one thing I have learnt from our frequent visits to Jurai is that being a member of the Emperor's council is potentially dangerous."

"You are talking about your Great Grandpa now, you know." Ryoko smirked appreciatively. "And Ayeka and Sasami's family."

"I didn't mean because of the Emperor." Tenchi shook his head. "But when you consider people like Lady Kuroda — or even Ramia Saotome, in her own way. Power and influence are dangerous things. That's why Tsunami trusts me with her magic. She knows I'll never be Emperor, so I'll never have the opportunity to really exploit what I can do."

"But you wouldn't anyway, you know, Tenchi." Ryoko paused, sending him an affectionate grin. "You're you, and that's all there is to it. All the arrogance in Juraian blood never got down to your level. You're far too Earth-born to be like Lord Tennan, and believe me I'm glad of it."

"I suppose you're far too Kii, then." Tenchi teased, and Ryoko nodded.

"Far too much of a bloodline mutt, and proud of it." She agreed.

Ryo Ohki let out a mew at that moment, and the pirate frowned, casting her a glance.

"You definitely have been here before, then?" She asked softly. Ryo Ohki nodded, hopping from her shoulder onto a large stone archway that seemed somehow out of place surrounded as it was by wild plants and briars. It was ancient, and mostly covered in thick greenery, but a small section of it had been cleared, and as Ryoko brushed her fingers against it, her eyes widened in surprise.

"*Washu* did this?" She asked. Ryo Ohki nodded her head, raising a paw against Ryoko's ear and Ryoko turned, seeing for the first time the strange black monstrosity that stood in the middle of the hut-like hovels.

"And that was where she was, when they jumped her?" She whispered. Ryo Ohki nodded again.

"Can you pick up her scent, Ryo Ohki? Any sign that she was here at all?" Tenchi demanded. Ryo Ohki leapt down from her stone perch, lowering her nose to the ground as she sniffed around for any recent trails. At length she dropped her ears, looking mournfully up at her

mistress.

“Nothing fresh. Not since they took her hostage.” Ryoko sighed. “And even that’s beginning to fade, washed in with a bunch of other really bad smells. People on this planet clearly don’t bath enough, that’s obvious. If they did, their horrible body odour would not be masking out Washu’s scent so quickly. I mean, she hasn’t been missing more than forty eight hours at the very most.”

“What do you suppose this statue is?” Tenchi bent to examine the black monument, eying the unfamiliar carvings with a confused gaze. “I wonder if that’s Kii. I didn’t get a good look at Tokimi’s prayer before we left the Unko and I should have. We could really use her eyes around now.”

“Ryo Ohki, do you know what this says?” Ryoko asked. Ryo Ohki frowned, twitching her ears thoughtfully. Then she mewed, hopping up onto the statue’s base as she did so.

“It was something about this wretched World and that stupid eagle.” Ryoko said darkly. “More heathen nonsense. Just like those scribbles Tokimi wrote down.”

“Maybe it *is* those scribbles Tokimi wrote down.” Tenchi suggested, and Ryoko’s eyes widened.

“You mean… this is the same prayer?” She demanded, incredulous. “Is *this* what Sasami saw, do you think?”

“I don’t know, but it makes you wonder.” Tenchi sighed. “I wish Tokimi was here, Ryoko. I’d like to know for sure.”

“But Seiryo said that Sasami saw blue fire.” Ryoko frowned. “And this is just a statue… nothing else. It doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“Still, if this is where Washu was…” Tenchi shrugged, running his fingers over the symbols as he did so. “This one I have seen before, Ryoko. Outside that building that Tokimi got all excited about — the Temple place. I think this was the same carving as the one for Eagle. Which backs up what Ryo Ohki remembers. And I’m sure that wretched prayer had some connection to the Eagle, too. It might be a stretch, but I’m sure there’s a connection.”

“Then what is that thing?” Ryoko gestured to the odd caped, cloaked shape that stood erect above the engraving. “That’s not an eagle, however you look at it. It looks more like a midget in a cape.”

“If it’s even a person at all. Whatever it is does seem to be veiled somehow, even in stone.” Tenchi frowned. “Honestly, I’ve no idea. But

at least we're on the right track here. This is where Washu was… so she can't be too far from here, can she?"

At that moment, Ryo Ohki stiffened against Ryoko's neck, letting out a warning yowl, and Ryoko started, glancing around them as she sought the source of her companion's unease. At first she saw nothing, then, from the shade of the hut-like houses figures began to emerge, each dressed in identical uniform and each with cool, threatening expressions on their faces. She cursed, grabbing Tenchi by the arm, and Tenchi's fingers slipped down around the hilt of his sword as the men grew closer.

"We should get out of here, before we can't." Ryoko murmured, but Tenchi shook his head.

"If these are the people who took Washu, they must know where she is." He said frankly. "If we run away, we might never find out."

"I know you're right." Ryoko admitted. "I'm sorry, I don't know what got into me. For a moment, I just wanted to…"

She trailed off, shrugging her shoulders.

"I guess it's nothing." She said, squaring herself as she prepared to fight off the newcomers. "Just a sense of something really evil hit me for a moment. That's all."

"Surrender and submit yourself to Lady Yuzuha's mercy!" One of the men stood forward, and Ryoko realised he was the leader, a thick band of fabric around his upper arm marking out his status among the rest. In his hand he held a sword with an oddly carved hilt, and as he raised it, strange light seemed to glitter across its blade. Ryoko frowned, shaking her head as she launched herself into the air, light flickering across her palms in a warning show of strength.

"Speak a decent language or don't speak to us at all!" She shot back. "We don't want to play games with you and if you answer us, we won't hurt you. We just want to know where Washu is. All right? Washu."

At her words, the man stared at her, a mixture of confusion and fear flickering across his face. Then his eyes darkened, and he said something in his thick, unintelligible tongue, raising his hand and gesturing towards the two trapped visitors. At once the gathered soldiers seemed to advance on them, and Tenchi pulled his sword from its niche in his belt, flaring it into life as he waved it in the direction of the strangers.

"I don't think they understand your question, Ryoko." He said

grimly. “And I don’t know what he just said, but I don’t think it was a friendly ‘welcome to the planet’ kind of greeting.”

“Then we’ll just have to make them understand.” Light flickered and spread between Ryoko’s fingers, and she sent a volley of bright orange energy in the direction of the lead soldier. Despite himself he stepped back, as Tenchi brandished his sword once more, making contact with a couple of the opposition’s strange blades and slicing through the metal as cleanly as if it were butter. As the severed blades clattered to the ground, Ryoko let out an amused chuckle, taking in the bewildered expressions on the faces of the soldiers.

“Nice move. That showed them.” She said appreciatively, sending a fresh volley of fire in the direction of the men. “But don’t scare them all off. We need one of them, at the very least. We need to know where Washu is, and I’m sure these guys know where that would be.”

Ryo Ohki let out a squeal at that moment, pressing herself flat against her companion’s shoulder, and Ryoko sent her a startled look, flexing her fingers as she dodged the sweep of the leader’s blade.

“What, Ryo Ohki? What’s bothering you now?” She demanded. “These guys are just idiots with swords, and you know that we can take them. Why are you twitching? What’s on your mind?”

Ryo Ohki let out a strange howl, fear in her amber eyes, and as Ryoko turned her gaze back towards the gathered men, she let out a gasp of surprise. The damaged weapons discarded, something had changed about their opponants, and the leader stepped up once more, a strange, cold glint in his eyes. As each of his followers clasped hands together, their captain raised his hands above his head, chanting in some strange dialect that sounded gutteral and eerie to Ryoko’s ears. Despite herself, she faltered, as a dark haze of magic seemed to spread through her consciousness, grasping thin, snaking fingers around her heart and pulling her to the ground. As she struggled to move her limbs, she realised that she had underestimated the power at her opponant’s disposal, and as she fought in vain against the paralysing effects of his spell, she was once more aware of that brush of evil, sweeping against her heart as he forced her to her knees.

“Ryoko! Ryo Ohki!” From somewhere in the fading world of her consciousness, Ryoko heard her fiance’s voice shouting her name, and then, as if called from some divine source, a spread of white light engulfed her, surrounding her in its comforting, gentle glow as it grew brighter and brighter, obscuring anything else from her vision. In the background, she became aware of the fervent mutterings of the enemy, and she blinked as slowly movement returned to her

weakened body. She turned her head, bemused, and her heart skipped a beat as she registered her companion, white blades of the Light Hawk spread out around his body in a glittering ethereal sheen.

"Tenchi!" She whispered, then, "I can't… fight any… more."

"It's all right." Tenchi's brows knitted together in concentration, and the ghostly white blades of his shield pushed further around them as he grabbed her tightly around the wrist. "Don't fight, don't ask, just trust me. All right?"

"Tenchi, I…"

"Just shut up and come with me!" Tenchi snapped, and surprised by the tone in his voice, Ryoko did as she was bidden, staring at him with uncomprehending amber eyes. Tenchi's grip on her wrist tightened, and then there was a sudden sweep of energy that rushed through her, leaving her gasping. She closed her eyes, feeling sick and dizzy, and for a moment the world seemed to be engulfed in bright lights and strange, swirling sounds. Then, as soon as it had come, it was gone, and everything was still.

She opened her eyes, staring up at blue sky as she registered the fact she was on the ground, the rich blades of grass soft beneath her body. Ryo Ohki leapt up into her line of sight, mewing and licking her on the cheek, and she reached up to grasp her small companion, struggling into a sitting position as she did so. She frowned, glancing around her at their surroundings, but there was no sign of either the houses or the massing soldiers.

"Are you all right?" Tenchi's voice came from behind her and she swung around, regretting the sudden movement as soon as she had made it. Her fiance stood a few feet away, concern on his face, and Ryoko frowned, rubbing her temples.

"What happened?" She asked faintly. "Your Light Hawk Wings… what…?"

"I guess I didn't know what I was going to do until I actually came to do it." Tenchi admitted. "But I had to get you out of there. So, well, I did."

"You *teleported* us?" Ryoko was alert now, gazing around her in surprise. "No wonder I feel ready to throw up — Tenchi, that's not nice!"

"You do it to me, when the need arises." Tenchi reminded her, dropping down on the grass at her side. "Besides, I'm not quite sure. All I know is that I had to protect you. It was like instinct — a sudden

impulse inside of me. I didn't really control the magic at all. I let it do what it wanted to do. That's why I held on to you so tightly. I didn't know quite what was going to happen, but I didn't want to risk letting you go."

"Tsunami's magic." Ryoko sighed, glancing at her hands. "I guess I owe you."

"What happened, exactly? What did they do to you?"

"I don't know. It was odd." Ryoko frowned. "Like something crept up inside of me and stopped me from moving, or fighting, or drawing on any of my power. Like it drained me of any energy I ever had. It was cold and creepy, and like something really evil had touched me. That's all I really remember."

"Hrm." Tenchi pursed his lips. "I wonder if that's what happened to Washu."

"Seems likely, doesn't it?" Ryoko sighed. "I'm not a weak person, Tenchi, but whatever that magic was, I couldn't fight against it. It's like Ryo Ohki said. It takes you without you being able to fight."

"But it didn't affect me." Tenchi offered her a crooked smile. "Jurai's magic protected me, or so it seems."

"Tsunami always protects you, and she's more powerful than most enemies out there." Ryoko acknowledged. "I'm glad you were on my team, Tenchi."

She sighed, rubbing her arms absently.

"I still feel cold and weak, but at least I'm alive and they didn't get to take me away." She added. "Though I have no idea what it was they were saying. I didn't understand a word."

"Me either." Tenchi shook his head. "But if it was Kii — like the carvings — I bet Washu did understand."

"That doesn't help when we don't know where she is." Ryoko grimaced. "Or where we are, now."

"I'm sorry. I don't have great control of this magic yet." Tenchi bit his lip, and Ryoko shook her head gingerly.

"No, I'm not criticising." She said, offering him a sheepish smile. "Really."

Ryo Ohki mewed, leaping out of Ryoko's grasp and onto her shoulder as she rubbed up against her mistress's ear, and Ryoko frowned, eying her quizzically.

“Really? That’s interesting to know.” She mused.

“What did she say?” Tenchi looked blank, and Ryoko shrugged.

“Just that whatever it was he chanted at me was the same as what he chanted at Washu.” She said. “Even though Ryo Ohki doesn’t understand the words, she remembers them. It was the same spell. At least, it must have been some kind of a spell.”

“Yes.” Tenchi agreed. “I think there’s little doubt about that. So those people — that uniform — whoever commands them has Washu.”

“Doesn’t take much to make that connection.” Ryoko nodded. She frowned, holding out her hands to her companion.

“Give me a hand to get up, will you? We shouldn’t be wasting time here.”

“But you’re still not recovered.” Tenchi frowned, hesitating, then grasping her gently around the wrists, hauling her to her feet. “Are you sure? You’re still quite pale.”

“I’ll live.” Ryoko dismissed it with a flick of her fingers. “If they did this to Washu, Tenchi, they probably knocked out her magic good and proper, at least until they had her under lock and key. Who knows what they’ve subjected her to since? We can’t sit around and do nothing. We know the force we’re dealing with now, at least a little better than we did before. And if you’re not affected by this magic, well, we might stand a good chance of getting her back unscathed. After all, if your sword can cut through their blades like that, we have nothing to worry about, do we?”

“My sword?” Tenchi looked blank for a moment, then his eyes widened. “My sword!”

“Yes, Tenchi. Your sword. You know, the thing your Grandpa gave you, that you’re not half bad at swinging around when it suits you.” Ryoko’s brow creased in confusion. “What about it?”

Tenchi bit his lip, turning apprehensive eyes on his companion.

“I don’t have it.” He admitted quietly. “When I summoned the Light Hawk Wings, I dropped it on the grass. I… I don’t know where it is now… but it’s not here with us.”

The hallways were long and dark, each one seeming the same to the frightened Tokimi as she was forcibly dragged through the

blackness towards some unknown central chamber. The journey from the village hovel to the huge stone construction they were now deep within had passed in something of a terrified blur and as she was roughly pulled forwards, she let out a little whimper of fear, tears still glittering on her lashes. Her captor, the woman who had grabbed her so harshly in the village took no notice of her discomfort, merely hauling on the ropes that bound her once more as they continued deeper and deeper into the prison-like palace.

"Nii-chan, where are you? Washu-neechan, are you here?" Tokimi glanced around her, hoping for some sign of salvation, but there was nothing but cold dark walls on either side and, as they reached the end of this narrow passage, she saw large wood-panel doors that swung back to reveal a high-ceilinged chamber. Her captor gave her a shove, forcing her to enter and as she did so, Tokimi's eyes were immediately drawn upwards to the beautiful ancient paintings that decorated the ceiling over her head. Despite her terror, her eyes opened wide with wonder and disbelief.

"Eagle-kami-sama." She whispered.

"Chiaki, explain yourself."

A female voice, hoarse and harsh disturbed her thoughts and she glanced across the chamber towards the speaker, fright flooding her anew as she absorbed the woman's demonic presence. Cloaked and hooded, the being appeared almost human, but Tokimi felt the cold dread stir within her heart and she knew that this was nothing more than a facade, concealing the demon's horrific true form from those around her. At the sound of her voice, Tokimi's captor prostrated herself before her mistress, bowing her head in reverence.

"Priestess Yuzuha, I have taken prisoner a girl who is not of this world." She said softly. "She claims… Lady, she claims treachery. She claims to be Tokimi-sama, the Priestess of legend."

"*What*?" A flicker of rage mingled with fear flitted through the creature's aura, and she turned, moving swiftly towards where the woman and her prisoner stood. "Tokimi-sama?"

"That is her claim, Mistress, though she may be no more than just a half-wit." Chiaki sent her captive a derisive look. "She seems out of her mind to me, but I thought you should be the judge."

"Indeed." The creature's eyes narrowed, and Tokimi saw strange fire flicker within them. "Very well, Chiaki. You have done your duty well and I shall see you rewarded. You may leave me now — I shall handle this prisoner, and I shall summon you if I need you again."

“Yes, Mistress.” Chiaki bowed her head again, then withdrew from the chamber, shutting the door with a harsh thud behind her.

Tokimi raised her gaze to her companion, frightened blue eyes meeting pensive glittering ones as for a moment captive and captor merely gazed at one another in silence. Then, at length, Yuzuha sighed.

“So, you claim to be a dead Priestess, do you?” She said, her tones rich with derision. “Is that what you think? That you’ve come to save this world from my rule, is that it?”

Tokimi swallowed hard, too frightened to even speak, and Yuzuha snorted, raising her hand and bringing it hard across the girl’s cheek.

“You will answer me when I speak to you.” She said sharply. “Who are you, and where did you come from?”

“T… T… Tokimi.” Tokimi flinched back at the sudden pain, tears springing anew into her eyes. “Inoue-no-T… Tokimi.”

Yuzuha’s eyes widened in surprise at the ancient construction with which her companion gave her name, and for a moment she faltered, as if unsure what to do. Then she curled claw-like fingers beneath Tokimi’s chin, raising her head and staring deep into her sapphire eyes. She muttered something in a language Tokimi did not understand, then the claws were pulled away.

“Inoue-no-Tokimi.” She murmured. “Yes, you believe it all right. There is no doubt in your expression, only pitiful, disgusting terror. You did not realise, did you, that this World does not look to you to be saved or cleansed? I should have you confined as a mad creature, and yet… and yet…”

She reached out a thin pale finger, touching Tokimi’s cheek gently, and at the icy chill in her touch Tokimi flinched back, shaking with terror.

“I have read much about Kihaku, since I have been here. The people have a love of writing down stories of days when they believe they were great.” Yuzuha murmured, derision in her expression as she gazed down at her prey. “About the tribes, and their ways. And I know much about Inoue-no-Tokimi. Much indeed. I have read about her family — the family whose natural ability to heal and help with herbs and flowers made them invaluable to the Priest’s ill-fated tribe. How they died through famine and war, and how the sole survivor was left with the Priest, raised as a Hakubi but never quite one… a daughter but not a daughter in blood. Yes, I know about the Inoue.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she drew her hand across Tokimi's cheek once again, causing the girl to cry out in pain and fear.

"I also remember how they described her, Inoue-no-Tokimi." She whispered. "*With eyes of sapphire blue, set deep with ruby embers, the gaze of one who sees out across many worlds and pronounces judgement on behalf of the World. Tokimi-sama, the cleanser of Kihaku. The one who ended the World that time had once begun.*"

There was a strange, mocking inflection in Yuzuha's voice as she quoted the ancient writings, and Tokimi bit her lip, struggling to absorb the words.

"I thought nothing of it, at the time." Yuzuha continued. "It was long ago, and Kihaku was dead a long time by that point. It seemed futile to even care, and people always heighten descriptions of things they want to be remembered. And yet, here you are. And more, you stare at me with those same eyes… sapphires set deep with rubies. The eyes that only the Inoue tribe possessed… the eyes that marked them out from their tribal neighbours. The genetic anomaly passed down through the Inoue line… and inherited by the last of their kind, the Lady Tokimi, who decided to become Priestess and take vengeance on her whole World by killing every single one of the people who chose to remain under her rule!"

She smiled, an evil, cold curl across her lips as she grasped Tokimi by the wrists, pulling her forcibly to her feet.

"You are a shadow of that legend, but yet I believe you *are* the last Priestess of Kihaku. Tokimi." She said softly. "You think you are clever, evading me and trying to sway the hearts of my people. But you are not going to succeed. I have waited many years to see whether this legend these heathen people so firmly believe would come to pass, and now I know the answer. Now I have found you, I will destroy you. And Tadashi, and Shouhei, and any others who you have sought to draw to your cause. This is not Kihaku, this is Rikishouki. You killed one planet, Tokimi, in an attempt to free it from Settler rule. But you will not do so here. I know about the Priests of Kihaku, and that without Kihaku's core, you can't wage magic on me the way you did on your own people. Whatever low-level tricks you managed to get Tadashi from my sight, it will not be a match for me or my power. I shall put you to death as an example to the people here that I am the Priestess and none will challenge me. And you will regret ever coming to this planet. Mark my words, Inoue-no-Tokimi, you may not have died on Kihaku, but this time there will be no mistake. This time you will be consigned to flame with none but your

precious Eagle to mourn you.”

Tokimi stared at her companion, horror washing through her as, at Yuzuha’s words, faint memories stirred within her heart. Images of Kihaku, racked by storms and volcanic eruptions flooded through her brain, as vivid as if they had happened yesterday, and over it all she saw her own form, flitting through the sky, hair floating out around her beneath the coronet of the Eagle as she pronounced judgement on the domes of the Settler people. As the pictures grew brighter, she saw the tapestry of Tsunami hanging deep within the Settler dome, and with a jolt, she realised where she had seen that tapestry before. She opened her eyes wide, struggling against the memories.

“Nii-chan.” She sobbed. “Nii-chan’s picture! *Nii-chan*!”

“Nii-chan?” Yuzuha stared at her for a moment, non-plussed. “What are you talking about, you wretch?”

Tokimi swallowed hard, drawing air into her lungs as she struggled against her dark memories. At length she succeeded, meeting Yuzuha’s gaze with a strange, half-hysterical gaze.

“You are a demon!” She exclaimed. “You are evil and I hate you. I hate you! Nii-chan and Onee-san will come, and they will destroy the demon! Nee-chan did it before, and she’ll do it again! You horrible, ugly demon monster, Onee-chan will come!”

“You truly are mad.” Yuzuha’s eyes narrowed. “It seems the legends are true, after all. Driven mad by the World indeed… such a sad fate for the last member of such a prestigious, peace-loving tribe.”

She laughed, but there was no genuine humour in her tone, and each note struck through Tokimi’s soul like a cold knife.

“You are simple indeed.” She said softly. “There are no people to come rescue you, Inoue-no-Tokimi. There are no true Kii, not any more. You killed them all. You and your Eagle magic. The weaklings on this world won’t provide you with any support, not when they know I’ve taken their precious figurehead a prisoner. I have waited a long time to execute the Priestess of legend. Now at last I have my chance. Tadashi and Shouhei — I will find them, and any others who support you and your cause. Your fate is decided, and there is noone to come and rescue you.”

“*Tokimi*… killed… Kihaku?” Tokimi’s eyes widened with horror, and she shook her head. “No. No! It’s a lie! *It’s a lie*!”

“So you don’t remember.” Yuzuha seemed amused. “How convenient for you, not to recall all the suffering you caused your

people. But I've read the histories, Tokimi-sama. I've seen the writings of those who escaped your death-ridden world and began a new life here. And each of them writes about Tokimi-sama, the last Priestess. The one whose fate remains unknown, and yet, the one who brought the end of Kihaku about through her anger and her rage. Do you truly not remember spilling so much blood? Shame on you. Do the lives of your people matter so little? If that's so, clearly my sentence is just. You are a traitor to the people and noone here will truly seek to save you. Not when they know exactly who and what you truly are."

She reached out to touch Tokimi once more, but the frightened girl raised her bound wrists, flexing her fingers in a gesture of protection against evil forces. A flicker of blue energy flared briefly around Tokimi's hands, and Yuzuha faltered for a moment, eying her keenly.

"So even without the magic of Kihaku, your faith is enough to protect you from what you see." She murmured. "Yes, the legends are true. You *are* Inoue-no-Tokimi, with the sight of the Kii and the faith in the Eagle that the people on this world have long since outgrown. Still, you will soon learn that you are no match for me, Yuzuha of Rikishouki. Isao!"

She raised a hand over her head, and the doors of the chamber swung open, revealing the young guardsman who hurried forward, casting Tokimi a sidelong glance before bowing to his mistress.

"Have you found Tadashi yet?" She asked softly, and Isao shook his head.

"No, Priestess, but patrols are circling the area." He said hastily. "And Mistress, we have found more visitors… more intruders to Rikishouki."

"More?" Yuzuha looked startled, and Isao nodded, bowing once more then holding out something small and wooden, setting it down on the ground before her.

"A man and a woman. We attacked, but they escaped. The man drew on some devil magic, Lady, and took them away." He said earnestly. "But he left this. Priestess, this blade cut through the swords of our men. It's like nothing I've seen before."

"Well, well." Yuzuha's eyes narrowed as she bent to pick up the object, casting Tokimi a brief glance as she did so. "A sword of Jurai. How interesting."

"Jurai?" Isao's eyes became big with fear, and Yuzuha gestured in Tokimi's direction.

“Perhaps there is more to this than meets the eye.” She said softly. “Isao, this is Inoue-no-Tokimi. I’m sure you know that name from your childhood teachings.”

Isao’s face visibly paled as he met Tokimi’s gaze, and he took a step back, raising his hands in a gesture of protection. Yuzuha nodded.

“Indeed.” She whispered. “They are making their move. After all this time, the prophesy of your ancient writers is coming to pass. The Priestess has returned, and must be made an example of. This woman destroyed your people’s homeworld and slaughtered your ancestors. We will consign her to the Eagle’s flame, as befits a servant of one who caused so much suffering. Take her and lock her in bonds. Chiaki will assist you. Ensure she cannot escape. And Isao?”

“Yes, Lady?” Isao eyed Tokimi in trepidation, but nodded his head. “What is it?”

“Find these other visitors. The owner of this sword.” Yuzuha said simply. “The Kii have no love for Jurai… see that those creatures do not have the chance to harm this place the way they harmed Kihaku. Remember that we have a common enemy in the Juraians, after all. Find them out and you will be well rewarded.”

“Yes, Lady.” Isao bowed once more. “Have no fear. No Juraian will be able to survive on this world… we will make sure of that!”

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

It was starting to get dark, and as Seiryo and his companions crossed the ground cautiously, the Lord realised that, in the primitive landscape, nightfall would mean true blackness. He sighed, glancing around him for anything that might serve as a guiding light once the sun had set.

“It’s getting late. And cold.” Mihoshi shivered, putting his thoughts into words. “Do you suppose that we should stop for the night? I mean, how will we see where we’re going when it’s pitch black?”

“I was just wondering about that.” Seiryo admitted. “But if it’s all right with you both, I don’t want to stop if we can help it. We’re no closer to finding Tokimi and I’m scared for her safety. The more I think about it, the more sure I am that those guards we saw must have apprehended her somehow. I don’t think she would have run this far and not come back. Even if she was upset… she doesn’t know where she is and once she’d calmed down I think she’d have realised that.”

“You think she’s a prisoner, then? Like Washu?” Kiyone asked. Seiryo nodded grimly.

“I do.” He agreed. “And I feel frustrated by it. If we understood more of this savage language, we might make more progress. As it is, it’s enough to have fashioned decent camouflage attire.”

“It was lucky, finding that abandoned hut on the edge of the village.” Mihoshi glanced pensively down at herself, taking in the slightly dusty peasant robe that she now wore. “These things are kind of itchy, but at least now we look more like we belong on this planet, right?”

“I suppose so.” Kiyone nodded, running her fingers absently through her thick dark hair. “Although I’m sure we still stick out. Even speaking to one another like this, we potentially give ourselves away as intruders because we don’t speak Kii. And if somehow they manage to track down the Unko…”

“We’ve seen no sign of anything that could detect my ship through its cloak.” Seiryo shook his head. “And if the craft had been compromised, I would know about it. I have the ship’s key on my belt, beneath this peasant’s garb. If anyone tries to enter without it, it will

make a noise. I think so far our mode of arrival has been well-concealed."

"I wonder what that woman died of." Mihoshi reflected, as they approached the stone markers that surrounded a settlement. "Do you think she'd have minded, that we took these clothes from her home? I mean, I know she doesn't need them now, but still… I hope it wasn't some horrible plague or something. You never know when you go visiting strange planets. Father always made sure we had innoculations before we went travelling when Misao and I were children — maybe we should have thought of that this time around."

"Mihoshi." Kiyone grimaced in her companion's direction. "That's hardly something we should be thinking about. It's wrong enough that we entered her property and took anything from her. Let's not think about manners of death, huh? It's getting dark and the thought isn't a nice one."

"Besides, I don't believe the unfortunate we found passed away from disease." Seiryo shook his head. "I think she starved. Her house was very poorly appointed, and she was obviously thin and under-nourished. Life is not easy on this world, so it would seem, if a peasant woman can still starve in the safety of her own home without any support structures to reach out to."

He paused, then sent Kiyone a wry smile.

"And we did bury her." He added. "So if nothing else, she can find peace."

"If people on this stupid rock even bury their dead." Kiyone said flatly. "I know what you're saying, Seiryo, but it still sucks. And I'm getting frustrated too, now… about Tokimi and whether or not she's all right. Washu, too."

"Perhaps we can ask Tenchi and Ryoko." Mihoshi suggested. "You have my radio still, don't you, Kiyo? Well, why not find out whether they've discovered anything important? They did head off towards that huge castle place, after all."

"That's not a bad idea." Seiryo admitted, as Kiyone slipped her hand into her belt, pulling out the slightly battered police radio. "We've not heard from them, but it wouldn't hurt to have an update."

"In which case, we should find some shelter." Kiyone suggested. "Those trees over there — that'll do. If we're going to enter this village and poke around, it would be less suspicious without something electronic to give us away. Come on."

As they settled themselves beneath the branches of a healthy old tree, Kiyone pressed the contact signal on the radio, frowning as she lifted the device to her lips.

“Ryoko?” She murmured. “This is Kiyone — have you discovered anything?”

“Kiyone?” Ryoko’s voice crackled back across the waves and Seiryo felt a sense of relief that at least their fellow searchers had not been taken hostage. “I was about to call you myself, you must be psychic. Have you people found Tokimi yet?”

“No, but we have a good idea what might have happened to her.” Kiyone said grimly. Slowly she outlined the guard patrol they had seen earlier, and their suspicions. “We’ll keep searching — we’re at the edge of a village now, but it’s getting dark. I guess we’ll search for as long as we can and keep going at first light regardless. What about you?”

“We’re not quite sure where we are, but I think we’re somewhere to the south of that big stone building.” Ryoko sighed. “We encountered some of those soldiers you mentioned — thanks to Tenchi’s magic, we avoided them, but they know we’re here and worse, they have Tenchi’s sword. The silly idiot managed to drop it — and we’re not quite sure how to get back to that path to look for it.”

“Hey!” Seiryo heard Tenchi’s protest in the background, followed by, “I saved us, didn’t I? Noone’s perfect.”

“Yeah, well, either way, tomorrow we’re going to get to that castle place and storm it one way or another.” Ryoko said briskly. “It seems that Tenchi isn’t affected particularly by the magic these people have, but I’m pretty confident now I know how they immobilised Washu. They used some kind of spell — if Tenchi hadn’t used his magic when he did, they would probably have taken me, too. It paralysed me almost completely — in truth, I still feel a little fuzzy from it, otherwise we’d already have teleported back onto our path and we’d probably already be knocking heads together. It’s powerful magic, so be careful, all right? If they catch you…”

“We’ll be ready for them.” Seiryo said firmly. “Don’t worry about that, Lady Ryoko. Our priority is to recover Tokimi safely and then help you with your own quest. We’ll be fine.”

“Seiryo?” Ryoko paused, then, “Whatever this place is, I really don’t like it. The more I’m here, the more on edge I feel about the ambience. I don’t know what it means, or even what’s causing it. But the last time I felt quite like this about something was when you and

your drone army came at us on the Earth. It's making me wonder if there's more than just Kii language involved here. I'm starting to think that somehow they really have revived Kihaku — don't ask me how — and that this is the work of some kind of a Priestess. One like Tokimi, who hates a lot of people."

"But this world doesn't have the same kind of magic as that one — does it?" Despite herself, Kiyone's heart clenched in her chest at Ryoko's words, and the pirate sighed.

"God knows." She said frankly. "Tenchi and I have just been talking it over, that's all. And we both think that there has to be a direct connection, more than just a coincidence. When those men jumped us earlier, there was something strange in their eyes. And when I stopped to think about it, I realised where I'd seen it before."

"In mine." Seiryo said quietly. "When I was under Tokimi's spell."

"Yes." Ryoko confirmed. "Exactly."

"Do you think they could use this magic to make Tokimi… behave like she did before?" Kiyone asked hesitantly. Ryoko snorted.

"You're asking the wrong person. I don't have a clue." She said frankly. "Washu is the only one who might be able to answer that question, and we haven't found her yet. But I guess we can't rule it out, can we? If this is some kind of reconstituted Kihaku, she was the last Priestess. It might make sense."

"Then I guess we keep looking, and hope we find her before anything like that can happen." Kiyone sighed. "Okay, Ryoko. This is Kiyone, over and out."

She flicked off the radio transmission, meeting her companions' gazes with a sober one of her own. For a while, none of them spoke, then Mihoshi sighed.

"Do you think this means we've got to have that whole fight thing again and blow up another planet?" She asked plaintively. "Because we don't have Tsunami with us this time."

"Imploding planets is not a very satisfactory solution to any problem." Seiryo said grimly, getting to his feet and holding his hands out to haul his companions upright. "But what is clear is that we can't waste time. If Ryoko's theory is even a little bit correct, Tokimi might be in greater danger than I thought."

"How could she be in more danger?" Kiyone demanded. "You thought they might kill her — how can it be any worse than that?"

“Death is preferable to living that life again.” Seiryo said darkly. “Trust me, Kiyone. Suki and I… we’ve done our best to shield Tokimi from her memories. Maybe it’s wrong — lying to her, essentially, about who and what she’s been. But she’s not like anyone else, and I’m not sure if her brain could handle it all. She’s so confused and delicate in so many ways — neither one of us knew how to make her understand the past or accept that it wasn’t her fault that things happened that way. But… of late…”

He frowned, gazing at his hands in the dim light.

“I’m a little worried she’s begun to remember.” He admitted. “She won’t speak to me about it, but her behaviour has troubled me. I don’t know whether, if her memories were to return, she might become a different person. And if Ryoko is right about this planet, then maybe she could be like she was before. I don’t know.”

Kiyone swallowed hard, despite herself, and Seiryo shot her a keen glance.

“It doesn’t mean that I’ll be so easy to sway to that cause this time.” He added softly. “And I won’t let you get hurt if I can do anything about it — either of you. But I don’t want to see someone as gentle as Tokimi transformed into a monster again because of some world’s evil magic. So we need to find her and as soon as we can.”

“Then we’re hunting through the night.” Kiyone said pragmatically. “Come on, Mihoshi. We’ll just have to navigate by moonlight and hope that this is a planet where they sleep soundly. I think we should try and aim for that castle building ourselves, if we can get our bearings. If Tokimi was taken prisoner, well, that seems like a logical place she might have been taken. And if Ryoko and Tenchi are also heading there, well, there’s strength in numbers. Jurai’s magic was what broke Tokimi’s spell before, right? It can’t hurt, even if we don’t have Tsunami. Tenchi is pretty strong, after all.”

“Ouch!” Mihoshi stumbled into a rock at that moment, tripping over her feet and falling headlong onto the grass. “That hurt… why do they put big ugly things like that right in the middle of the pathway!”

“I think pathway is an optimistic description.” Seiryo said dryly, as Kiyone helped her friend upright. “Are you okay, Mihoshi?”

“Just bruised, but ouch.” Mihoshi rubbed her leg ruefully. “What is it, anyway? A bit of a wall?”

“Not sure, but it looks sort of like the marker that Tokimi found outside that shrine place.” Kiyone ran her fingers over the stone

pensively. “The light isn’t very good, but I think it’s carved with Kii characters.”

“Not that that helps us much.” Seiryo frowned. “Since we don’t speak Kii.”

“No, but you said yourself that decryption was as much about recognising patterns and symbols as it was knowing the words beneath the code.” Kiyone pointed out. “Didn’t you? I mean, you have seen Tokimi’s prayer, and so have I. And I don’t know about you, but I recognise a couple of the characters from it. Tell me what you think — but that one looks like the picture she used for World. Doesn’t it?”

“Let me see.” Seiryo frowned, squinting at the rock through the dimming evening light. “Yes, you might be right. Does that mean there’s another abandoned temple in this village too, then?”

“Possibly.” Kiyone’s brows knitted together, and she ran her fingers once more over the dips and grooves of the rough stone. “But I think… I think this is the name of the village. It’s not quite like the other stone, and I don’t see any buildings like that one anywhere around.”

“It still doesn’t tell us where we are, though.” Mihoshi frowned, shivering as a cold wind whipped through her body. “And it’s getting cold. We should keep moving.”

“There was a village near to the castle Ryoko mentioned.” Kiyone raised her gaze to Seiryo’s. “Wasn’t there?”

“I imagine there are any number of villages on this planet, Kiyone.” Seiryo sighed. “Much the same as each other, when you don’t speak the language.”

“I don’t know about that.” Kiyone frowned, returning her attention to the inscription. “Kii is like pictures, right? I mean, the letters are like icons representing different things. Like the Eagle and the Eagle Feather and all of those things?”

“Yes.” Seiryo agreed. “That’s my understanding. Why? What have you found?”

“Well, I don’t pretend I speak Kii.” Kiyone ran her finger underneath one particular icon. “But if I was playing artistic identification, I’d be pretty sure that that word meant castle. What do you think?”

“You know, you might have a point.” Seiryo’s eyes widened in surprise, and he frowned, bending to pick up a stray twig that lay on

the ground beside them. Striking it firmly against the rock to ignite it into a torch, he held the burning flame closer to the icon Kiyone had indicated, gazing at it thoughtfully.

“A symbol, rather than a word.” He murmured. “Reading Kii without speaking it. You really are a good student, Kiyone.”

“I’m only following the principles I’ve been taught.” Kiyone shrugged her shoulders flippantly, but Seiryo caught a faint flush of pleasure in her cheeks at his words. “That’s all. And if that’s a castle, and that one means World, then this village must be somewhere important — somewhere close to where we started out. Have we come around full circle? Did those woods just arc around the same area of land?”

“It’s starting to look that way.” Seiryo confirmed. “And I think… we should be careful.”

He tapped his finger against another icon, shrugging his shoulders.

“If you’re right about that one being a castle, then it isn’t a stretch to imagine that one as a bow and arrow.” He said softly. “Which means that this might not be a village at all. It might be a base for those soldiers. And we might be right on the verge of walking into a trap.”

It was a peaceful sunny day, as the young girl picked her way carefully through the summer blossoms, glancing around her in curious interest at each new flower and sprouting plant. For a moment she paused to examine the teeth marks of some wild creature that adorned the trunk of a nearby tree, running her fingers through the grooves as she wondered what animal had made it, and whether or not it was the first sign of a nest.

“Washu-chan!”

At the sound of his voice, the child raised her head, wild red waves bobbing around her face as she met the expression of her companion with a broad, playful grin. A man stood before her, a girl of no more than two or three clutching his hand, and as she ran forward to join them she let out a merry laugh.

“It’s so pretty when the summer’s coming, Father.” She said decidedly, reaching his other side and slipping her hand into his as they continued their journey down the steep stony path towards the small village settlement nestled at the foot of the hill. “Don’t you think so? I counted seven different plants today, and I think something was going to have a family in the tree, too — I saw teeth marks. I wonder what animal it was that made it —

don't you wonder, Father?"

"I wonder about many things, my child." The man's eyes softened and he nodded his head. "But on a day like today, it's easy to be thankful to the World for the fine weather and the health of our people, isn't it?"

"Yes." Washu nodded her head. "Papa, are we going to the temple?"

"We are." Her father confirmed. "And I want your help to clean and purify the shrine ready for this afternoon's summer blessing. It will be busy, no doubt — many people have much to be grateful for. Even living beneath these troubled skies, we still must continue to be thankful for the things we have been given, after all."

Washu's bright green eyes roved across the landscape towards the shimmering domes that glittered faintly in the morning sun.

"Will the Settlers come too?" She asked curiously, and the man's eyes darkened for a moment as slowly he shook his head.

"I imagine not." He said quietly. "Washu, those people are heretics, and even though they call themselves inhabitants of this World, you must learn now that they cannot be trusted. If you only knew how much pain they cause the World on a daily basis… how they dig into its heart and steal from its core — you'd understand that they are not friends and that we should not try and bring them into our circle. It will only end in pain, if we do. The World would not forgive such a betrayal."

"Heretics." Washu tested out the word on her tongue, then, "But their homes look so pretty, Father. Are they really bad people? Truly?"

The priest nodded his head, and for the first time Washu was aware of the lines of weariness crossing the man's brow.

"The World suffers much at their hands." He said softly. "And one day you will understand more clearly, Washu-chan. One day it will be your burden, to keep this World alive and peaceful amid the torture inflicted upon it by those who don't understand. Your soul and the World's will be tied up together, just like it is to mine at present. Then, my child, it will all become much clearer."

He frowned, glancing out in the direction of the settlement himself, then he sighed.

"It makes one so very tired." He murmured, more than half to himself. "To keep so many emotions and destructive impulses so firmly in check. Washu, I just pray that your turn does not come before you are ready for it. It is a heavy weight to bear… I would not see it rest upon the head of a child."

Washu was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then she turned, offering her father a smile.

"But you're the Priest, so I won't be." She said simply. "Right?"

"Yes, for now, that's right." The Priest smiled back, and for a moment his weariness was lost behind the gentle affection in his gaze. "And in the future, when it is your time, I'm sure you'll know what's best to do. To take care of this World and of Tokimi-chan… that is the purpose of our tribe, Washu-chan. To venerate and guard our World, and to most of all protect our people from heretic settlers and the Eagle's own anger. Such a job has been ours since memory can recall — our lives and that of the World belong to one another. No matter what, you must always remember that. That one day, this burden must be yours."

Washu turned over in her makeshift bed, pulling the blanket more tightly around her as her dreamscape faded and blurred into another more recent memory. As she watched, the trees and plants of Kihaku disappeared, replaced by the steel panels and walls of her laboratory at the Science Academy, and even in sleep her heart skipped a beat as she registered that she was not alone. A man stood by the furthest wall, thick blond hair curling loosely over his head and bright, intelligent blue eyes sparkling as he looked at her, his Academy uniform crisp and clean yet his bearing indicating that he was of much higher birth than just an ordinary scientist. About his throat, a bright golden chain glittered, the pendant marking out the insignia of his noble family, and as she looked at him, Washu was almost sure she could feel the cool metal pressing up against her own skin.
"Another late night, Washu-chan?"

The man crossed the lab towards her, taking her hands in his as he bent to kiss her gently on the forehead. "You work too hard, you know. Didn't they ever tell you that all work and no play makes Washu a dull girl?"

"Mikamo." Washu's expression broke into a warm grin and she slipped her arms around her companion, hugging him tightly as he returned her gesture. "I didn't think you were back until tomorrow, you know. Seniwan high society seems to take up so much time — I had to do something while you weren't here."

"Well, I'm here now." Mikamo's eyes twinkled. "What can I say… I missed you."

"I missed you too."

Washu rested her head against his chest, pursing her lips as inside of her indecision wracked her senses. At length she sighed, raising her gaze to his as she took in his handsome features and his bright, youthful vivacity. He

was much younger than she was, she knew that, by many centuries. But in all the time she had been alienated from her World, he was the first person she had ever been able to love, and she knew that she did not want to be keeping things back from him. Not if… She caught the thought before it could go anywhere else, but a faint blush touched her cheeks as she realised she was already contemplating his role in her life long-term.

"Why so quiet?" Mikamo asked softly, meeting her gaze with quizzical blue eyes. "Something on your mind? Something you want to talk about?"

"I… I think so." Washu sighed, absently toying with a stray wisp of red hair as she debated how best to begin. "I need to tell you something… before we go any further. Before I… before I love you more than I do now, Mikamo. Because I know that your family are important, on Seniwa… and I know that you have ties and responsibilities to them. Well, I need you to understand who I am, too. Why I have no ties and responsibilities like that… I need you to know everything. Because… because now, if you chose to hate me, I would be able to bear it. But if this continues…"

"Why would I hate you?" Mikamo stared, confused, and Washu glanced at her hands.

"You know that I came to the Academy before you did." She murmured. "But I travelled much before that, Mikamo. I've existed far longer than any other alumni, and that's a fact. My name is Washu Hakubi — this you know. But… but the truth of it is… I told you I was from one of Jurai's colonies, and in a sense that's almost true. At least, it was true. A long, long time ago."

"You're confusing me." Mikamo brushed her cheek gently. "What do you mean? That you're a lot older than you seem to be — that you're not twenty five, but something more than that?"

Washu nodded her head slowly.

"I don't know precisely how long has passed." She admitted. "Time slips by when you've nothing to focus on. But yes, it has been a… a very long time."

She sighed, biting her lip absently as she absorbed the look in his eyes.

"Mikamo, I… I'm from Kihaku." She said softly. "I was… my father… he was the Priest there, until he was killed in a battle with the Juraian invaders. That's who I truly am… the daughter of a heathen Priest whose suspicions and superstitions meant that an entire World became destroyed."

"Kihaku?" Mikamo's eyes widened in shock. "Are you serious? That long ago?!"

Washu nodded miserably.

"And it's worse than that." She said softly, tears glittering on her cheeks. "My World died, Mikamo, troubled and tormented by a Priestess who could not control its spirit. That duty should have been mine, but I turned my back and ran away from my responsibilities. Kihaku died… because of me. Because I turned my back on them when they needed me and refused to be crowned Priestess. I'm the last Kii there is now… the last of my race, the last of my culture, the last one who remembers that planet as anything more than a dead rock spinning through space. And that… that's my fault. I am such a coward, really… I've been so selfish, and caused so many people so much pain. I can't let you love me until you understand that, Mikamo — I can't let you love someone you don't truly know."

"Washu-chan." Mikamo hesitated for a moment, then gently he slipped his hand into hers, leading her across to a steel bench and ushering her down as he sat beside her. "This is a lot to take in, I won't deny it. But I've never seen you shed tears before, and I'm not sure I like seeing it now. Stop it, all right? Just stop and take a deep breath… whatever you've been through, you're not going through it any more. This is the Science Academy, and you're one of the most celebrated scientists in the universe. Your past is just that to me — past."

He lifted a finger to brush the tears from her lashes, offering her a crooked smile.

"I think you're blaming yourself for something that probably wasn't as much your fault as you think." He added. "If everything you just said is true — and you've not lied to me yet, so I will believe you — I still don't think that you can take responsibility for something like the death of a whole planet. Stop for a moment and think it over. It's crazy."

"Not so crazy." Washu shook her head. "I appreciate what you're saying, Mikamo, but the Priest was the only thing that controlled the World's spirit. Without one…"

"Washu." Mikamo shook his head, pressing his finger to her lips. "You said yourself that the planet was ravaged by a Priestess who couldn't control it. That was her shortcoming, not yours. You shouldn't feel guilty because you decided on your own destiny, instead of just blindly following a fate picked out for you by someone else. That would never have been you, Washu, and if you hadn't come here, we wouldn't have met. So dry your eyes, all right? You've lived with this a long time, I can tell, and it's burrowed deep into you beyond all reason and rationality. Well, I'm here now, and I'm not going to turn my back on you because you've decided to take responsibility for the death of your planet. I love you, and that's what matters to me right now. Whether you're Juraian or Kii or whatever you

are, it's not important to me. You're Washu, and that's what counts. What you do in this universe is always more than enough, you should have realised that. Through your science, through your just being here for me…"

He paused, kissing her gently once more.

"Especially being here for me." He amended. "Those things are important too, and just as much so as the other things you mentioned. Letting someone else choose your future makes you a slave, Washu, and believe me, there are enough of us noble-born slaves out there already fighting against that shackled destiny. Don't let yourself be dragged into the same trap. You have a truly brilliant mind… the universe would have lost much, if you had chosen to stay behind on a planet that was probably inches away from Juraian destruction anyway."

"Mikamo." Washu gazed up at him in wonder, and he grinned, nodding his head.

"So what were you so worried about?" He bantered, holding her tightly to him as she leant up against him, comforted by his words. "Whatever you are and whatever you've been, you are Washu and that's all that counts. In the end, being Washu is all you can be, and all you can do… only you know what the right path is and was for you to choose."

"Washu-sama?"

The sound of a soft voice sent the images flying away and Washu opened her eyes, blinking as she struggled into a sitting position. For a moment she was disorientated, still lost in her dream, but then she met Mayuka's anxious fuschia gaze and she gathered her wits, remembering where she was and what was going on.

"Washu-sama, it's getting late. Almost time." The young girl murmured. "I've woken Tadashi and the boy — are you sure we should take him with us?"

"I'm taking him because he asked me to, and Tadashi also." Washu nodded her head. "But I want you to stay here, Mayuka. It's risky and dangerous, and I don't want you hurt."

"Not a chance." Mayuka said darkly. "This is my fight too, Washu-sama, and I'm coming along too. My father would have been ashamed of me, if I had hidden like a coward instead of facing up to my responsibilities. Besides, that creature killed him and my whole family. The least I can do is meet her face to face and see her final defeat."

"Well, I hope it'll be that simple." Washu frowned, glancing at her hands as she flickered amber energy between her palms. "Still, if that's

how you want it, I suppose I can't stop you."

She paused, then sighed, the magic fading as she put her fingers to her throat, feeling the cool, hard metal of the pendant that she wore.

"Mikamo, you were right." She murmured. "In the end, only I can make the decisions about what I do and don't do… and only I can live with the consequences of them, also. So much I didn't understand before is starting to make much more sense to me now. It's like this truly is my destiny — like somehow you can't evade fate no matter how hard you try to. Ryoko couldn't escape her confrontation with Kagato, after all — maybe I can't evade mine with my past."

"Washu-sama?" Mayuka was looking confused, and Washu realised she'd spoken aloud. She smiled ruefully, shaking her head.

"Nothing." She said simply. "Just thinking. That's all."

"That necklace you wear… what does it mean?" Mayuka asked curiously. "Is it something from Kihaku?"

"No." Washu shook her head. "No. It was given to me by someone who meant more than the world to me, once upon a time."

She smiled again, getting to her feet.

"He gave it to me when he died, so that I'd always have a memory of him to keep with me." She added. "And I'm going to hope that I can draw on his strength too, when we go to face Yuzuha. He was to me what Tadashi is to you, Mayuka… and in order for you and Tadashi to have the future I couldn't have, I'm going to do my best to make sure that we get rid of this demon once and for all."

"I have faith in you, Miko-sama." Mayuka said firmly. "And I'm not alone. I've spoken to our other allies — those who support the movement beneath the surface but till now have lacked the leadership to afford a confrontation. Now you're here, things have changed. People have hope. They will come out and follow you, Washu-sama… they will come and pledge their allegiance to their true Priestess against the imposter Yuzuha. We're not alone, truly. And we will win. Now you're here — I know we will."

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

As they slipped out of the chamber, Washu was aware of Tadashi and Shouhei waiting for them, and for a moment she paused, assessing each in their turn. Tadashi's eyes were grave, though deep within them a spirit burned brightly and Washu realised with a jolt that his warrior ancestry was still as much a part of him now as it had been part of the the tribe who had fiercely guarded their territory on Kihaku. Shouhei, by contrast, was pale and drawn, his eyes huge in his face as he contemplated what they were going into, and for the first time Washu began to wonder if taking him along was a good idea. She frowned, resting a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Are you sure you want to be along on this ride?" She asked softly. "It might be dangerous. No… no, it *will* be dangerous."

"I'm coming." Shouhei said firmly, shaking his head. "Captain is, so so am I."

"You look about to pass out from fright." Mayuka said disparagingly. "It's not going to be a battle for children, you know… if you're going to get scared, maybe Washu-sama is right. Maybe you should stay behind."

"I'm not a coward!" Shouhei protested, indignation lighting up his features. "And I'm not a child! You're barely older than I am, and you're a girl to boot. How are you going to be any more useful than I am, huh?"

"Miko-sama is a woman, too." Mayuka shot back. "And my ancestors led our people to peace on this planet — or had you forgotten that? This is my fight! Yuzuha killed my family, and damn right I'm going to be there to get revenge!"

"Washu-sama is the Priestess, so it's different." Shouhei shot back.

"Both of you, stop this." Washu cautioned. "You're both nervous, and setting each other on edge. More, you're setting me on edge. I'd like to be able to think clearly, so please, don't fight."

"It's dark above ground." Tadashi said quietly, raising his gaze to the tunnel walls. "It's not the best time to tackle a demon such as Yuzuha. Her weakness is daylight. Her strength is in the night."

“Yes, I know.” Washu frowned. “It’s not ideal, I agree. But by now Yuzuha must know that you and Shouhei have turned against her, and more, that you’re probably sheltering me. Whether she realises who I am or whether she doesn’t is neither here nor there. All three of you would probably be killed on sight if she was to happen to see you, and so I can’t risk leaving it any longer. Thanks to Shouhei, I’ve interpreted as much of those scrolls as I can — but the truth is, there’s not much there that prepares me for a fight with a demon. I never even believed that such beings existed — I’m learning that my father’s superstitions weren’t all unfounded.”

She sighed, shrugging her shoulders.

“Sometimes science doesn’t have all the answers.” She added. “And that’s what I left home looking for. Answers. Maybe here I’ll find them.”

“So we’re going up?” Mayuka asked. Washu hesitated, then she nodded.

“No other way to go but up.” She agreed. “Mayuka-chan, did you say that you’d spoken to those others who have doubts in Yuzuha?”

“Yes.” Mayuka agreed. “There are a lot of people too frightened to act without a figurehead, but with the strength of a Priestess to guide them, I know they’ll come to the fore. They’ll be ready to challenge Yuzuha’s people too, you can be sure of that. They know that we’re making a move tonight.”

“The more people who know, the more likely someone will know who shouldn’t.” Tadashi looked troubled. “It’s easy to pretend to be something you’re not, Mayu-chan. Aren’t I proof of that fact?”

“Either way, there’s no other way to get to Yuzuha’s castle but to go above ground and take the chance.” Washu said frankly. “I could teleport us there, but I want to keep my magic in reserve as long as I can. I don’t know what it’s going to take to battle a demon, and although I’ve exorcised evil forces before, they’ve been in humanoid creatures. Not beings like this one. I’ve no precedent to work from.”

“Then we shouldn’t go above ground at all.” Shouhei said frankly.

“How else are we supposed to take her on?” Mayuka demanded. “Is this another way of trying to wimp out?”

Shouhei’s eyes narrowed angrily, and he tossed his head, indignation in his expression.

“My father was a scribe who recorded the history of Rikishouki.”

He said pointedly. “He and his kind, right back as far as our memory can go. He trained me in the same art, remember. And I have a good memory. I know that this whole area was constructed when the first Kii came here, and I know that a lot of is isn’t being used. There are tunnels right the way to the castle, because that’s how they transported the coffins of Masoto-sama and the others to their final resting place.”

“You mean the passage that leads from my quarters down here?” Tadashi looked startled. “I didn’t realise anyone else knew about that.”

“No, not that.” Shouhei looked impatient. “Not from the Guards’ quarters or the prison. To the core of the castle — to the ceremonial chamber in which Yuzuha gives her orders. The one with the domed roof — with the paintings of our ancestors and the Eagle across the ceiling stone.”

“That’s crazy.” Mayuka snorted. “I’ve lived down here for years, Shouhei. I know these tunnels like the back of my hand. Don’t you think I’d have found a passage to the castle already, if it existed?”

“I told you, I *know* it does!” Shouhei snapped back.

“You’re sure about this, Shouhei?” Washu looked startled. “There’s really a network here, beneath the ground, that would lead us right to Yuzuha? One that she’s not found… or exploited to her own ends?”

“I guess they were filled in, but they exist all right.” Shouhei nodded his head. “I remember it clearly on the plans Papa had. This network of tunnels spreading out from an antechamber like the legs of a spider. That’s why I remember it so well.”

“Tadashi — you don’t know where that might be?” Washu glanced at the guardsman, who shook his head.

“No, but Shouhei’s people were the kind of people who would have known, if they did exist.” He said pragmatically. “His house was full of documents and scrolls and all kinds of things. Things I couldn’t have read. Rough copies of writings, yet to be submitted to the Archive, I suppose. The whole village was put to the torch to eradicate the plague, so most of that was lost. But it’s the sort of thing I can imagine Shouhei’s father having. And so I guess it’s very possible there are trackways here that haven’t been used since ancient times.”

Shouhei looked triumphant, and Mayuka grimaced.

“And what if it’s a trap?” She demanded. “What if he’s just leading us into the demon’s hands?”

“Shouhei believes what he’s saying.” Washu said quietly, shaking her head reprovingly. “He’s not deceiving us, Mayuka. And if those bracelets of yours really do give you Kii sight, you know it as well as I do. He believes in these tunnels, and I’d rather save a confrontation with Yuzuha’s guardsmen until its absolutely necessary. So we’ll try it his way, at least for now.”

Mayuka frowned, folding her arms, but she made no demur, and Washu eyed her in some amusement, taking in the petulant expression on her young face. She nodded.

“I have a lot of faith in all of you.” She added. “But it would be better if you didn’t argue among yourselves.”

“Shouhei-kun, do you know where these tunnels led off from?” Tadashi asked. Shouhei frowned, a look of concentration crossing his face as he pursed his lips.

“Maybe.” He said slowly. “I’d never been down here before Washu-sama brought me, so I can’t be completely sure. But the chamber where the Elders of Rikishouki lie, that’s not far from here, is it? And that was on Father’s plans.”

“It’s along this corridor and to the left.” Mayuka nodded.

“So we’ll head that way.” Washu decided. “And see if anything seems familiar.”

“It shouldn’t be too hard to find it, when we get there.” Shouhei assured her. “I’m pretty sure of that. It’s just a case of looking for it, that’s all.”

He offered her a smile, genuine and warm, and Washu found herself returning it.

“Lead the way, then, Shouhei-kun.” She said gently. “We’re right behind you.”

“Yes, Mistress.” Shouhei saluted sharply, turning on his heel and hurrying away down the hallway. Mayuka sighed.

“You really think he’s not going to flake out on us up there?” She asked, as they followed in his footsteps, tracking the route back towards the resting place of the first Rikishouki leaders. “He might be just a stupid kid, but I don’t want to see him get himself killed because he doesn’t know what he’s doing.”

“Shouhei has no family to make that decision for him.” Tadashi said evenly. “So we have to let him make it for himself. You’re doing the same thing, aren’t you? Facing an enemy when you know how

much peril it could put you in?”

“It’s different for me. Yuzuha killed my family — she’s always been my enemy.”

“I think she’s always been the enemy of anyone who’s ever truly believed in the Kii’s right to freedom.” Tadashi said softly, and Washu gazed at him in surprise.

“Tadashi?”

“Yes?”

“You’re starting to sound more and more like your Ohira ancestors, when you talk like that.” Washu dimpled. “I never saw the likeness before, but here, on the verge of a battle… you really do have warrior blood running through your veins.”

“Perhaps I do.” Tadashi looked self-conscious. “And I’ll do whatever I can to help you, Miko-sama. I don’t know about my faith in the Eagle — sometimes it wavers, and sometimes I think he’s forgotten us. But I have faith in you. I’ve already seen you do things that I’ve only read about in histories and legends. And I believe you do want to help us. So I’m ready to fight, as hard has I have to for us to win.”

“Maybe the Rikishouki Kii are more Kii than I realised.” Washu laughed. “I’m sure the ancient tribes of Kihaku would be gratified to see it, too.”

“Miko-sama!”

As they reached the ancient burial chamber, Shouhei emerged from the darkness, excitement in his eyes as he accosted them. “I think I found it! I think I found it!”

“Found what, exactly?” Mayuka frowned. “Didn’t you say it was filled in?”

“Yes, but I knew it would be marked… because they had to come down this way and back, when they’d buried the Elders.” Shouhei said impatiently. “Look. Here. On the wall — opposite Masoto-sama’s casket. Do you see it?”

“The light in here could be better.” Tadashi frowned. “What are we looking at?”

“The Kii character for spider.” Washu said softly, running her fingers over the grooves in the wall. “Yes, Shouhei. I see it. And the stone here feels smoother and different from the rest, somehow. There’s a break… like something was added later.”

“So how do we get through?” Mayuka asked. Washu frowned, glancing at her hands. Then she shrugged.

“Stay here.” She instructed. “I’ll see how far along it’s blocked… and if it’s not far, I’ll blast a hole through. If it’s all the way, we might have to think again. I really didn’t want to use much magic on getting there.”

“Magic?” Mayuka stared, and Washu grinned.

“Just wait.” She instructed, stretching out her fingers as she phased her hands through the stone. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Washu-sama!” Mayuka’s incredulous exclamation echoed in her ears as the scientist pushed through the thick hewn lumps of rock, reaching out for any sign of open space beyond. To begin with, she thought that the tunnel was completely backed up with rubble, but then the debris seemed to dissipate and she found herself standing in a dusty, narrow hallway.

“This is what Shouhei said. A passage to carry the coffins — it can’t be much wider than that.” She murmured, flickering a faint light at the tip of her finger as she glanced around her. “And noone has been in here for generations. There are even still grooves on the wall where the caskets probably rubbed against the stone. Shouhei’s hunch was right… this is the way to the spider ante-chamber, and then up to Yuzuha’s ceremonial den.”

She brushed the dust from her hands, focusing her energy as she phased back through the rock to her waiting associates.

“Shouhei is right. It is a tunnel.” She said nonchalantly, amusement sparkling in her green eyes as she took in the non-plussed looks on both Shouhei and Mayuka’s faces. “Well? Are we going? If so, stand back… I think I can blast a hole big enough for us to crawl through, and the passage is clear beyond the first few steps.”

“You… walked through a… a wall.” Shouhei said faintly. “Like a ghost. Are you a ghost? Miko-sama, is that how you’re able to be here after so many years? Are you a ghost after all?”

“No, I’m not a ghost.” Washu shook her head. “If I was, I’m sure I wouldn’t be able to touch things, now would I? It’s just Hakubi magic, nothing else. Now stand back, all right? I’ll try not to make it too big an explosion, because I don’t want to bring the ceiling down on us. But it’s hard to gauge in these conditions.”

“Washu-sama used that same power to get into the Archive earlier on.” Tadashi added. “And dragged me with her. I’m glad that you can

open the tunnel up, Washu-sama. I really don't fancy doing that again."

"Well, it takes a lot of strength to phase other people, especially those who are resisting it." Washu said categorically, as her hands glowed and flickered with amber light. "All right. Here goes."

Almost as soon as she'd said the words, a flare of orange energy shot out across the chamber, illuminating it in a bright amber haze. As the magic made contact with the blocked in section of tunnel, there was a tremendous crash and then the sound of collapsing masonry. The floor of the chamber seemed to shake as a huge cloud of dust blew out in all directions, causing her companions to choke, and Washu flexed her fingers, projecting a forcefield around the others as the tiny fragments of stone began to settle, leaving a white trace all around them.

"Like snow." Mayuka whispered. "Washu-sama, your magic is amazing."

"Yes, but with vibrations like that, someone up there will know something's amiss." Washu said with a sigh. "So we need to get a move on, before they detect the source of the disturbance. It's dark and there are no lights through here, so we should stick close together. Hold hands, even. Just so noone gets lost."

"Are we still relying on Shouhei to lead?" Mayuka asked. Shouhei bristled.

"I can lead." He said defensively. "I found this, didn't I?"

"*I'm* going to lead." Washu shook her head. "Because if any danger strikes, it will strike at me first. But I want you behind me, Shouhei. In case your knowledge of these passages comes in handy again. You said that they came off a chamber like the legs of a spider — and that one of the other legs led up to Yuzuha's chamber?"

"That's right." Shouhei nodded. "A purification chamber, I think. So it was written on Father's plan — but they were strange letters. I didn't completely understand them, and there were a lot of things he didn't get to teach me. Would that… would that make sense?"

"Yes." Washu said grimly. "So far we're all in keeping with a Hakubi burial rite… and if the Elders of this World were revered as leaders and even Priests or Priestesses, it makes sense that they would be given burials imitating the customs of the Hakubi tribe."

"We've lost so many traditions, haven't we?" Mayuka sounded wistful, and Washu shrugged.

“Traditions only survive while there are people who believe in them enough to keep them alive.” She said. “Forcing the issue never helps anything. You have your own traditions now, Mayuka-chan. And your own culture. I’m sure, when this is all over, your planet will thrive again — but it doesn’t have to thrive by being Kihaku. Time has passed, after all. Things have changed.”

“Washu-sama, when it is over… will you stay?” Shouhei asked hesitantly. Washu did not answer at first, then she sighed.

“Let’s address the problem of Yuzuha before we address anything else.” She said finally. “We don’t know what we’re going into, yet.”

“But we have found Shouhei’s purification chamber.” Tadashi reflected, running a stray scrap of flint across the stone wall to create a flickering flame as they stepped into a small, domed chamber. Around the edges, dips in the ground indicated basins that had once held water, and in the centre, a small raised platform surrounded by dusty sconces hinted at rituals long since dead. “So one of these passages must lead up to Yuzuha.”

“The question is, which one?” Mayuka sighed. “Even discounting the one we’ve come down, there are still seven more.”

“If each of them are marked like the last, we should be able to find it.” Washu said simply. “Shouhei, do you remember which passage it was?”

Shouhei frowned.

“It was a long time ago.” He admitted. “But I think… I think it was the symbol for sky, Miko-sama. I think. The ancient Kii symbol for sky… I guess because it led to the surface, and not out to a tomb.”

“Right.” Washu pursed her lips. “Then that’s what we’re looking for. If Shouhei is right — and so far he has been — the others should have names of people buried here, or at the least tribal insignias. It shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“I think I have it.” Mayuka darted across the floor towards a panel sunk deep into the wall. “Look… is this the one we need? It looks sort of like our word for sky now — it has to be the right one.”

“Good spotting.” Washu came to join her, nodding her head. “Then that’s the way we should be going.”

“I really don’t think so, traveller.”

A fresh voice echoed out of the blackness at that moment, and Washu started back, grabbing Mayuka roughly by the arm and

pushing her back out of the way as the corridors suddenly seemed to be full of identically uniformed people. At their head stood a figure swathed in black, and Washu felt a deep sense of foreboding wash over her body as she made eye contact once again with the strange demon that claimed to lead Rikishouki.

At the sight of her, Shouhei gasped, pressing back against the wall, and Yuzuha chuckled, seemingly amused by the disconcerted terror she had managed to create.

“You’ve come close, I’ll grant you that.” She said softly, raising her hands as two or three of the waiting guardsmen stepped forward into the chamber, hands hovering over the carved hilts of their blades. “But this is as far as you’ll come. My men have been looking for you everywhere, stranger. It seems you haven’t been completely honest, since your arrival… we’ve found no sign of a spaceship. But we have found you.”

“Yuzuha.” Mayuka murmured, and Yuzuha’s eyes flitted across the chamber, taking in Mayuka’s features with a mixture of surprise and annoyance.

“So.” She whispered. “One of you survived. And you seek to challenge me… the Priestess of this World. Isao! Chiaki! Grab them!”

At her word, two uniformed Kii stepped forward, making a bee-line for the indignant Mayuka, but Tadashi was quick to stand in their way, drawing his own carved weapon as he stood firm against them.

“Noone is hurting Mayuka.” He said softly. “Isao, Chiaki, do you really want to keep betraying your own people like this? Your ancestors — what did they fly here to achieve? What did they sacrifice for our freedom — why obey the orders of one who seeks to quash our independant will?”

“You are a traitor to Rikishouki, Captain Tadashi.” Isao drew his own blade, launching at Tadashi and it was all the guardsman could do to hold his ground, taken off guard by the sudden ferociousness of the attack. As their swords engaged one another, Isao’s female companion grabbed a hold of Mayuka, pulling her hands back behind her body with a malicious smile on her features.

“You are now Yuzuha-sama’s prisoner.” She murmured softly. “This is as far as you go, traitors. We have your Priestess in our custody. You cannot go any further.”

“Stop this!” Washu’s eyes narrowed and she flexed her fingers, electricity crackling from her hands as she illuminated the chamber in

an eerie glow. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, but if I have to, I will. Let Mayuka go, Yuzuha… she’s nothing more than my guide. I have business with you — business that doesn’t concern them.”

“I don’t know who you are, traveller, but your words don’t interest me in the least.” Yuzuha said flatly. “She is the daughter of a tribe I thought dead. I never forget a face — and I see her father’s, staring out at me as clear as day. She is a descendant of Masoto — and being so, she is marked for death. All descendants of that tribe are traitors to my world.”

“Rikishouki isn’t your world!” Shouhei objected hotly, as Tadashi managed to disarm Isao, pushing him against the wall with some force as he turned his attention to where Chiaki still held Mayuka firm, surrounded by a cluster of other uniformed officials. “Rikishouki belongs to the Eagle!”

“Shouhei.” Yuzuha looked derisive. “Do you know how easy it would be for me to order you all to die here and now?”

“You can’t kill us that easily, Yuzuha!” Mayuka struggled free of Chiaki’s grasp, glaring at her indignantly. “We have our Priestess to protect us!”

“Your Priestess?” Yuzuha raised an eyebrow, as the young girl flung her arm out towards Washu. “*That* creature? Surely you aren’t so naive as to believe the first stranger who wanders in is your long lost Priestess of legend, daughter of Masoto? You must be simple folk indeed, if you’re so easily convinced.”

“Washu-sama is the Priestess of Kihaku.” Mayuka said defiantly. “And you can’t keep us downtrodden forever, Yuzuha! Rikishouki will be free again, and you’ll wish you’d never come here!”

“Priestess of Kihaku, is it?” Yuzuha pursed her lips, raising her hands to prevent her soldiers advancing any further on Tadashi or Mayuka. “Well, this is interesting. Is that what you’ve told them you are, traveller? Is that what you’ve claimed to be, to gain their assistance and loyalty here?”

Washu’s eyes narrowed, and she flickered energy from her fingers once more in a warning, although as she glanced around the chamber she realised that using it would be dangerous. Not only were the passages filled with Yuzuha’s people, but the stone of the ceiling showed some cracks from age and the blast she had inflicted earlier, and she bit her lip, knowing that a further assault of electric fire might bring the roof down on them all.

“Nothing to say to that?” Yuzuha’s tone was mocking, and she pursed her lips, slipping her hand inside the folds of her dark cape as she did so. Slowly she produced the Juraian sword, and Washu’s eyes widened with alarm as she recognised sword Tenchi, the magic fading and dying from her touch as she took a step or two forwards.

“What did you do with the owner of that sword?” She demanded.

“I see.” Yuzuha’s eyes narrowed. “So my suspicions were correct, after all. You aren’t a simple, lost traveller. You’re a spy… a spy from that world that destroyed and tainted the heritage of my people, so long ago. Can you blame the Kii, then, for rallying to my cause, when their so called saviour is really an agent from Planet Jurai?”

There was a gasp from the surrounding militia, and Mayuka’s eyes widened in surprise at the demon’s words, her gaze flitting to Washu as if she couldn’t believe what was being said. Washu frowned, shaking her head slowly.

“Tell me what you did to the owner of that sword.” She said quietly. “And be aware, if you killed him, then I *will* kill you. Regardless of who you think I am and whether or not anyone helps me.”

Yuzuha smirked, holding the sword aloft.

“Regard, daughter of Masoto. Regard, Captain Tadashi.” She said softly. “This sword is a blade of the Royal House of Jurai. It belongs to the Emperor of that World. Such weapons are the same type that inflicted pain and injury on me when I fled here. These are the people who invaded and tortured Kihaku… forcing so many of your ancestors to die. This woman is simply another of them — another agent sent to fool and deceive you, with her evil Jurai magics and her slick tongue. But she is not your Priestess. She is a true traitor. I have served and protected this world from outside invasion using my magic since the day I first came here. She seeks to break that down — so that Juraians can once more bring their ships here to plunder and loot your planet and force you to accept their way of life. Is that truly what you want? To be pawns of Jurai again?”

“Washu-sama?” Mayuka bit her lip. “Tell me she’s lying. You… she… she must be lying. You… you are from Kihaku. You are our Priestess! Aren’t you?”

“The Priestess of Kihaku is imprisoned in the cells beneath my castle annexe.” Yuzuha slid the sword back into her cloak, her aura glittering pensively as she surveyed her gathered foes. “The boy who owns this sword escaped — for now. But he will be found, and he will

be imprisoned.”

She chuckled.

“It was an entertaining ruse, traveller.” She added softly. “But I know that you lie. The Kii Priestess will face the flames at sunrise — a fitting end for one who sought to slaughter and pillage her own world, don’t you think?”

“Tell me what you mean.” Washu demanded, confusion flickering in her green eyes. “What Priestess? What slaughter?”

“For someone who claims Kii heritage, traveller, you really are ignorant.” Yuzuha laughed. “I mean the Lady Tokimi, of course. The last Priestess of Kihaku — the true traitor who began the Kii’s pain. Tomorrow, as the sun rises, the people of this world will finally have justice for the death of their world. And then… and then… then it will be your turn. Then you will face the flames too — after all, what better punishment is there for ones allied with that evil world Jurai!”

She flexed her hands, dark energy hovering around her fingers as she aimed a beam in Washu’s direction, but Washu, struck speechless by the mention of her sister’s name could pay no heed to the danger she was in.

“Tokimi?” She murmured. “But… that’s not… not possible. That’s just not…”

She faltered, biting her lip as she registered Yuzuha’s demeanour.

“You really believe it.” She whispered. “You believe that Tokimi… but…”

“Washu-sama! Look out!”

Shouhei’s yell burst through her daze at that moment and she turned, registering the young boy flinging himself in her direction. A burst of dark magic flickered across the chamber, as Shouhei shoved the scientist roughly to the ground, out of the range of Yuzuha’s magic. He let out a shriek of pain as the magic made contact with his young form, and Washu felt a tremendous wave of pain and fear wash through his body as they both fell heavily to the ground. Panic gripped her heart as she struggled into a sitting position, registering the fallen form of the youngster sprawled across her lower body, and at the sight of his burnt, scorched skin she bit her lip, feeling sick.

“Shouhei.” She whispered, as for an instant she lost her grip on her emotions. Then her eyes narrowed, and she flared electric light from her fingers, blasting it in Yuzuha’s direction.

“You’ll pay for hurting him!” She exclaimed. “You’ll pay for hurting all of them, Yuzuha — this isn’t over yet!”

With that she scooped the limp, light form of her young saviour up in her arms, flickering and blurring them out of view as she re-materialised them both on the ground outside the palace. Gently she laid her burden down on the grass, touching his cheek gently with her fingers. His eyes flickered open, and she swallowed hard, tears on her lashes as she surveyed his face.

“Why did you do that, you silly boy?” She whispered. “When she’d said all those things about me — why did you leap to my rescue?”

Shouhei’s lips twisted into a faint smile, and he reached out a dusty, charred hand for her fingers.

“Because you are the Priestess.” He whispered. “Whatever Yuzuha says. You’ve been kind to me. So… so I believe in you. I believe in you, Washu-sama. I believe… you are… the Priestess of Kihaku.”

Washu bit her lip, placing her fingers against his brow.

“This isn’t a safe place to leave you, and I have to find Mayuka and Tadashi.” She murmured. “Shouhei, I want you to be brave for me. I need you to hang on. If you can do that, I’m sure I can heal your wounds. But I need my magic right now — I need it to rescue our friends. Whether they believe in me or not, I need to get them out of the danger I took them into. Do you understand? And I need to know what Yuzuha meant — about the Priestess she says she has locked away.”

“I understand.” Shouhei whispered, nodding faintly. He gripped her fingers, then,

“Come back soon, Miko-sama.” He added. “I’ll be waiting.”

Washu got slowly to her feet, dashing away the tears that had begun to fall as she cast him one last look. Then she closed her eyes, focusing on the depths of the underground chamber as she shifted her form back to the scene of the confrontation, half afraid of what she might find.

Yuzuha and her people were gone, however, and as soon as she re-materialised, Washu realised why they had withdrawn. The cracks across the chamber’s uneven ceiling had worsened and, towards the back of the room, large chunks of whiteish grey stone had tumbled down already, creating dust and debris across the floor. Tenchi’s sword lay abandoned on the floor, as if ripped from demon hands by the collapsing masonry, and she bent to pick it up, glancing at it

before sliding it into her sash.

“At least this is safer with me than with Yuzuha.” She muttered. “I just hope I can find Tenchi before she does.”

As she stepped cautiously between the lumps of broken rock, she caught sight of a hand protruding from beneath one of the slabs and she bit her lip, phasing her hands through it as she made contact with the body beneath. Gently she pulled the limp figure free, realising as she did so that whoever she had found was beyond her help. As she brought the woman into the light, however, a mixture of relief and regret washed over her as she recognised Yuzuha’s guardswoman.

“Chiaki.” She murmured. “But you were with Mayuka… does that mean…?”

“Washu-sama?” A faint voice came from behind the slab of rock, and Washu frowned, phasing herself through the rock more completely as she followed the sound of the voice. “Washu-sama, are you there?”

“Tadashi?” Washu’s brows knitted together. “Is that you? Where are you?”

“Mayuka and I are trapped beneath the falling masonry.” Tadashi’s voice was strained, but the sound of it gave Washu comfort. “We’re not hurt, but… but I don’t know how long it will hold up.”

“Mayuka is with you?” Washu pushed forward, feeling ahead for any gap in the rock pile. “All right. I’m coming through to you. Hang on. I’ll get you out of there, I promise. It’s the least I can do, for getting you into this mess in the first place.”

“Washu-sama, about Shouhei?” Tadashi sounded anxious as Washu reached their side, registering that her two companions had been protected by the edge of the ceremonial bier that stood in the centre of the chamber. Tadashi’s arms were firmly wrapped around an unconscious Mayuka, as if he hoped to shield her with his own body, and Washu bit her lip, grasping hold of both of them as she willed her body out of the chamber and back to the grasslands outside.

“Shouhei is here.” She murmured. “I’m sorry. I’ve brought you nothing but trouble, have I?”

“Well, our underground hideout isn’t as safe as it was.” Tadashi sighed, stretching and rubbing his temples against the disorientation of her teleport. “But Mayuka and I are all right. She just fainted, that’s all — she’s not injured.”

“Shouhei is.” Washu dropped back down beside the still form of the teenage boy, realising that he had passed into an unconscious state. “He was brave, Tadashi, but…”

“Is he dead?” Mayuka asked faintly, stirring from her stupor as she registered her surroundings. “Is he… is he dead?”

“No.” Washu shook her head. “And he won’t be, if I have anything to say about it.”

She frowned, placing her hands gently against Shouhei’s chest as she focused all of her energy and will into repairing the boy’s damaged body. As she felt the strange sensation overwhelm her, she found herself reminded of the last time she had used this magic, healing her sister and returning her to life. She frowned, forcing the thought away as she redoubled her efforts, and as the magic flowed out of her, she murmured the soft words of the Kii prayer, her aura flickering with blueish light as she sent as much of her strength into her young companion as she could muster.

“Washu… sama?” Tadashi’s eyes opened wide with amazement as she fell back against the trunk of a tree, taking a deep breath to steady herself.

“He’ll be all right now.” She murmured. “I told you, I wouldn’t let you die. So I’ll keep my word, even if you don’t believe I’m the Priestess any more.”

“Washu-sama… what Yuzuha said…” Mayuka looked troubled. “Was it true? That sword… are you in league with Jurai? Is that the world you came here from — are you really a spy? Has everything just been an illusion — are you not the Hakubi Priestess after all?”

Washu sighed, rubbing her temples. Slowly she shook her head.

“I’m not a spy for Jurai.” She said softly. “And I was born on Kihaku. I have not deceived you in that regard. But I won’t pretend I don’t have connections with that world. The owner of the sword is a dear friend of mine. I didn’t think they’d come to find me… but clearly they have, and they might have been hurt.”

“How can you trust in someone from Jurai?” Mayuka demanded. “They’ve always been our enemies!”

“Always is a long time.” Washu said wearily, turning her attention to the teenage boy as he began to slowly stir. “Gently, Shouhei. You’ll be all right now, but don’t rush to your feet. You were badly hurt, and it won’t hurt you to take a moment to rest.”

“But…” Mayuka glanced at her bracelets, indecision in her fuschia eyes. “I don’t understand what all this means. If you are allied with Jurai… doesn’t that mean… what does it mean? I look at you and I see the last Hakubi — the daughter of the Priest. But to befriend Juraians… what about the Eagle? What about his will? What about our freedom — doesn’t that matter at all?”

“I don’t care whether the Eagle *did* send Washu-sama, or if she came here of her own accord. Even *if* she came here from Jurai.” Tadashi said frankly. “She came, and that’s all that matters. In all these years, she’s the first person who’s ever stopped and cared enough to help our people — the first one who’s put her own life and safety on the line to take on our enemy. To me, that makes her more than good enough to be our Priestess. Does it really matter, if she is the one from the legend or if the last Hakubi died with our planet generations ago? Or does it matter more that we get to live our lives without fear or persecution again, the way that our ancestors wanted us to live?”

Washu stared at him in surprise, and Tadashi offered her a crooked smile.

“I told you that I had faith, and I still do.” He said simply. “You just used all your strength to save Shouhei’s life. And you came back to rescue Mayuka and I, even though it could have put you in danger. So our plan didn’t go quite right the first time — well, that’s no reason we should give up. I don’t care if you are the Priestess or if you’re not. I’m still willing to fight.”

“Me too.” Shouhei struggled into a sitting position, folding his arms across his chest.

“Mayuka?” Washu asked softly. “Do you still have any trust in me, after all of this?”

Mayuka ran her fingers along the edge of the bracelet, then she sighed.

“I think the World is still talking to me, telling me you are his lost Miko.” She said sadly. “I suppose… I’m sorry. I expected… so much that isn’t fair to expect from anyone. You told me yourself that you’d abandoned Kihaku and turned to other worlds for life. I should have realised that things had changed. That you hadn’t always been Kii — not all this time. But Tadashi is right. You did come back for us. And I do believe… I do. I just don’t completely understand. That’s all.”

“I’m sorry I’ve destroyed your image of the saviour Priestess.” Washu said gently. “But I’m far from perfect. Believe me, I’ve made

more mistakes in my life than most people. But I do want to help you… if only because I want to put some of those mistakes behind me.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“Besides, she’s made it personal with me now.” She added. “Hurting Shouhei like that… and taking Tenchi’s sword.”

“What about the other thing she said, Washu-sama?” Tadashi dropped down on the grass, shuffling down beneath the overhanging branches of the tall old tree as he did so. “About the Priestess, locked in her prison. Was she bluffing? She seemed convinced.”

“She was convinced.” Washu bit her lip, quelling the uncertainty that rose up inside her at the memory. “Tokimi. It’s not possible, and yet… and yet I’m afraid…”

“Tokimi-sama.” Shouhei pursed his lips. “The cleanser of Kihaku? Is it possible that she’s still alive too?”

“Tokimi is alive.” Washu agreed. “But she suffered severe mental injuries following the will of Kihaku, and her brain became impaired. She should be miles from here — safe and sound in the care of dear and trusted friends. That she might not be…”

She faltered, shaking her head.

“I can’t even imagine what Yuzuha might do to her, but either way, she believed she had the last Priestess of Kihaku in her custody.” She added. “And because she believes it, I… I think I believe it.”

“So what now?” Mayuka shivered, and Tadashi slipped his arm around her shoulders. “We can’t go back underground, because Yuzuha knows that we’re hiding there now. We need somewhere else that’s safe… here in the middle of the palace grounds is hardly that.”

“Whilst it’s dark, we’ll have to take our chances. I can project a forcefield if need be.” Washu said, inwardly hoping her assertion was correct and that she had the strength to do so after her night’s exertions. “Shouhei probably shouldn’t be running about so soon after such a major injury, even if I did manage to fix his wounds. And we don’t have anywhere else to go.”

She slipped her fingers beneath her scarlet sash, pulling out the dusty hilt of Tenchi’s sword.

“As soon as it gets light, we’re going to go looking for the owner of this sword. And we’re going to find out whether or not Yuzuha is telling the truth about my poor sister.”

“If Tokimi-sama is a prisoner, we should help her.” Mayuka nodded. “After all, she’s a Kii Miko as well — we owe her that much. She rid the world of Juraians, and without that, we would probably never have begun a new life here on Rikishouki.”

“You have such a strange view of your history, you know.” Washu sighed.

“I don’t see how.” Mayuka frowned. “The Juraians are what caused Kihaku to die, aren’t they? I don’t understand why you don’t hate them, Washu-sama — how can you be such close friends with people who originate from the world that destroyed yours? If you really are the Hakubi heiress — and my bracelets convince me that you are — how can you even think such disloyal things?”

“People are people. Lives are lives.” Washu said reproachfully. “You don’t understand what it’s like out there in the universe when you’re on your own, with noone or nothing to hold on to. The Kii have been feared and hated for generations because of what happened on our planet, but Tenchi and his family took me in and accepted me as one of their own. They are not enemies to me. They *are* family, in more ways than one. And if you want to have a chance at surviving, you’re going to have to put suspicions and fears behind you. Tsunami is not Kihaku’s enemy. She never was. Her people may have caused our world much pain in the past, but Tsunami never did. Yuzuha is manipulating your fear of the outside, preventing you from truly finding your freedom. That’s all.”

“I suppose some fear is so deeply ingrained, we find it hard to shake it off.” Tadashi said reflectively. “Jurai caused us so much harm so long ago, but… but that was a long time ago. The people on Jurai now are not the same people who attacked Kihaku. Maybe Washu-sama is right. Maybe people are people, regardless of where they come from. And perhaps that’s why we were silly enough to fall into Yuzuha’s trap — because we only saw her as someone who hated Jurai, instead of seeing who she really was. We lost our Kii sight a long time ago, in more ways than one. Maybe it’s time we tried to find it again — and looked beyond our own paranoia. We’ve made prisoners of ourselves with it for long enough — and it’s time it stopped.”

“You sound like an Ohira again, Tadashi-san.” Washu raised a faint smile. “But I’m glad you understand.”

She spread her hands, returning Tenchi’s sword hilt to its secure hiding place as she did so.

“Besides, the owner of the sword would only be on this planet for one reason.” She added. “When Yuzuha first took me prisoner, I sent my spacecraft home to find help. He’s come to find me. So if he’s in danger at all, it’s because of me.”

“Time’s moved on outside of our world, but we haven’t.” Shouhei murmured, and Mayuka sent him a startled look.

“Shouhei? You too?”

Shouhei smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

“I’m fed up of being scared.” He said pragmatically. “If Washu-sama believes in her Juraian friends, well, so do I. Yuzuha is evil. We don’t need Kii sight to know that. So anything that gets rid of her must be good.”

“Yuzuha said that at sunrise she would consign the Priestess to the flames.” Mayuka remembered. “She’s going to execute Tokimi-sama as a traitor to Kihaku!”

“Yes, that was my fear too.” Washu said grimly. “But I don’t know where, when or how.”

“I might.” Tadashi frowned. “There’s one place where such sacrifices have taken place in the past. If we could get there… maybe we could prevent anything from happening. If you’re strong enough, Miko-sama… there’s a military encampment not too far from here and that’s where these things usually happen.”

“A military…” Washu’s eyes opened wide with alarm. “That was where I was taken prisoner! Oh, but I’m not… my energy hasn’t returned enough for me to teleport us there to wait for the sunrise.”

“So we could walk it.” Mayuka pulled herself to her feet. “Couldn’t we?”

“We’d draw attention to ourselves.” Tadashi looked doubtful. “We’re right in the middle of enemy territory at the moment. Yuzuha is probably searching for us underground, but when she realises we’re not there…”

“For now, we should stay here.” Washu said decidedly. “It’ll be easier for my magic to restore that way, and I’ll keep an eye open for trouble. Tomorrow, we can’t make the same mistakes as we did today. With or without the support of your allies, Mayuka, we need to take Yuzuha and stop her from hurting this planet any more. She already sacrificed one of her own in the chamber below ground — the guardswoman Chiaki. That’s one more death than I wanted, even if

she was on the enemy's side. I don't want to risk any more than I have to."

Mayuka glanced at her hands, then she nodded, seemingly making up her mind. Slowly she slid the bracelets from her wrists, setting them down on the ground in front of her companion.

"Washu-sama, I think it's time you had these." She murmured. "They're more use to you than to me — and you might need them when we face Yuzuha tomorrow."

Washu hesitated, then she smiled, nodding her head.

"Perhaps you're right." She admitted, scooping them up in her fingers and glancing at them as they glowed and shimmered with blue light. Prickles of energy and emotion flickered through her and she hesitated for a moment, then slid the armlets carefully onto her own wrists. For a moment her aura glowed with a strange blueish gold energy, then it faded, and she sat back against the trunk of the tree.

"Tomorrow, we stop Yuzuha." She said firmly. "No matter what."

Chapter 10

Chapter Ten

“Well, I think we found the castle.”

Tenchi gazed up at the rugged stone wall of the building, frowning as he ran his fingers over the outer surface. “So what now? How are we going to find Washu, without getting spotted?”

“Good question.” Ryoko sighed, leaning up against the wall. “Getting down here was no mean feat, even when I did manage to teleport us back on target. But Tenchi, didn’t it strike you as strange that there were no guards on duty as we came through that weird little cluster of huts? There’s noone around. From being so keen to catch us — where have they all gone?”

“You think they’re laying a trap?”

“Possibly.” Ryoko grimaced. “Or preparing for something that takes priority.”

“A sacrifice!” Tenchi whitened, and Ryoko nodded.

“That was my thought.” She agreed. “We’ve wasted so much damn time, since we started looking for Washu. First we couldn’t find the stupid planet, then we lost Tokimi, then we got sent off course by those guardsmen and now…”

She shrugged.

“It almost seems like they want us to come here.” She added. “Perhaps we’re being invited to their little murder-by-flame ritual.”

“Murder-by-flame… Sasami’s vision?” Tenchi bit his lip. “Then we have to find Washu as soon as we can. Standing around here is no good. If it is a trap, well, we’ll just have to fall into it, I guess. We don’t have much choice.”

“Tenchi.” Ryoko sent him a startled glance, then she grinned, nodding her head as she reached across to grasp him by the hand. “You and I are thinking on the same wavelength. So that being so, we’re going in — forget the polite way, we’re going to play pirates and sneak in through a less obvious entrance.”

“Wait a minute, Ryoko, you’re not going to…”

Tenchi faltered, as his fiancee pulled him firmly through the thick stone wall of the castle, closing his eyes against the disorientation as they found themselves inside the tall, austere building.

“Well, it’s quicker.” Ryoko sounded unrepentant. “Plus, I wanted to make sure my magic was feeling better. It is.”

“You’re saying that if it hadn’t been, we might have been stuck in that wall for all eternity?” Tenchi’s eyes snapped open and he gazed at her in alarm. “Ryoko!”

“Desperate times.” Ryoko shrugged. “So, we’re in.”

“And there’s noone here either.” Tenchi narrowed his eyes, glancing around him. “It’s like the place is deserted.”

“It has to be a trap.” Ryoko pursed her lips. “They must know you’d come looking for your sword, and that’s how they’re hoping to take us prisoner.”

“We’d better hope they’ve over-estimated their cunning, then.” Tenchi said darkly. “I don’t know if I can summon the Light Hawk Wings twice in such a short space of time. And your magic is weak against whatever spell they tried to cast on you.”

“If you ask me, that’s another indication that this world is somehow a reconstituted Kihaku.” Ryoko said darkly. “My magic has fifty percent Kii origins, and it would make sense… they weakened Washu the same way. It’s like they can tackle Kii magic, because they understand it better than they understand Jurai’s.”

“The Kii didn’t like Jurai very much, so I can’t imagine we’ll get a friendly reception if we’re caught.” Tenchi reasoned. “We should keep a low profile, and keep our eyes and ears open for any sign of life.”

“I’m with that.” Ryoko nodded. “Come on. This part of the building looks too fine to be associated with prisoners, but so far nothing has been quite what it seems. I vote we keep walking and hope we come across something that might lead us to Washu. After all, it’s harder to catch a moving target.”

“Should we tell Kiyone and the others what we’re doing?” Tenchi wondered. Ryoko shook her head.

“No. They have their own concerns, finding Tokimi.” She said. “And we don’t want to draw attention to ourselves more than we have to, do we?”

“Guess not.” Tenchi agreed. “Well, you’re the pirate. I’ll follow your call.”

“Good boy.” Ryoko’s eyes danced with amusement, although Tenchi saw the faint flicker of gravity in their depths and he knew she was worrying about her absent mother. “Then let’s move.”

“This place really is amazing.” Tenchi murmured, as they made their way along the high-arched hallway, glancing around him as he did so. “Don’t you think so? I thought the Kii were primitive, but this is something else.”

“It’s an old pile of stones glued together.” Ryoko said pragmatically. “That’s all. Nothing smart about that, Tenchi. Any idiot can heap up building blocks.”

“Yes, maybe, but still.” Tenchi raised his hand to indicate the ceiling over their heads. “Look. So colourful, and so many pictures. Doesn’t it seem even a little bit like a fairy-tale to you?”

“I’m a little old for fairy tales.” Ryoko shook her head, pulling him to one side as she peered around the corner of the passageway. “Coast is clear. We’re not house-hunting, so would you give it a rest? Ancient castles give me the creeps, anyway. It’s probably haunted, and I’ve had enough experience of ghosts already in the past few years, thank you very much.”

“All right, all right.” Tenchi grimaced, but he nodded his head. “I was just observing, that’s all. You’ve seen more of space than me — these things are still a novelty.”

“Well, enjoy them a little more quietly.” Ryoko admonished. “We might be walking willingly into a trap, but there’s no reason to make it worse.”

“True.” Tenchi acknowledged, obediently muting his tones.

“There is something eerie about this place, though.” Ryoko murmured, as they crept between hallways and through arches. “Don’t you think so? Completely devoid of life… yet the walls… have you noticed? How they glitter when you walk past them — as if they’re some kind of remote detection system?”

“Do we think that there’s more technology here than we anticipated?” Tenchi looked anxious. “I hadn’t noticed any glittering… am I being dense and Earthling again?”

“No more than usual.” Ryoko frowned, raising her fingers to touch the stone. “Just… it’s since we took that last turning. Look… don’t you see it?”

She ran her palm over the brick, and Tenchi’s eyes widened as he

saw specks within the stone shimmer with an odd blue light.

“That is weird.” he agreed, reaching out his own hand to brush the wall, but as his fingers made contact with the stone, nothing happened. “And that is even weirder. It doesn’t seem to like me. Maybe the castle is talking to you, because you’re part Kii. What do you think?”

“I think I’m getting creeped out.” Ryoko confessed, touching her fingers to the stone once more. “How’s that possible?”

“Shards of something, embedded in the rock. Like some kind of jewel.” Tenchi peered over her shoulder, reaching past her to pry a loose chip free of its base. “Here. Look. That’s what’s glowing. Some kind of mineral or something — I guess it’s probably a way of lighting the corridors of this place, since they don’t seem to have electricity.”

“Let me see.” Ryoko held out her hand, and Tenchi dropped the fragment into it. As it touched Ryoko’s skin, his fiancee gasped, clutching it more tightly as her eyes widened in surprise. She swallowed hard, stumbling back against the wall, and Tenchi hurried to steady her, alarm flooding his features at her strange reaction.

“Ryoko?” He asked anxiously. “Ryoko, drop it! If it’s going to hurt you like those people did… drop it. I’m sorry, I should have…”

“No.” Ryoko seemed to get a grip on herself, shaking her head. “No, Tenchi, it’s not that. It’s like… it’s like something rushing through me. No wonder I feel creeped out in this place — it’s this stone. It’s making all my emotions heightened inside of me. But when I touched this piece…”

She faltered, biting her lip.

“Tenchi, I know where Washu is.” She murmured. “For a moment, I saw her thoughts and I *knew*… I knew exactly where she was. And more, Tenchi… *she has your sword*!”

“The offerings are ready, Father.”

Tokimi knelt before the shrine, twitching her hands into a gesture of reverence before turning to offer her father a smile. “Everything is. I managed to find the best flowers, too. This will be the best summer ritual we’ve ever held — I just know it will.”

“Tokimi-chan.” The priest raised his head from where he had been offering prayer, giving his adoptive daughter an approving grin as he did so. “What I’d do without you these days I have no idea. This planet is

lucky to have you — lucky that your people were wise enough to leave you with me to grow and develop in all the ways you have. One day you will make a fine healer, of that I have no doubt — following in the path of your ancestors and keeping their skills and memory alive."

"I hope so." Tokimi's eyes sparkled, although there was a faint gravity within their unusual depths as she contemplated the thing that remained unspoken between them. "Father, you know that I'm grateful for everything you've done for me. Whatever you ask of me, you know I'll be there to do it. No matter what."

"Yes, I know." The Priest got slowly to his feet, a wistful flicker crossing his green eyes and for a moment Tokimi wondered if he was thinking of his absentee daughter. "Well, no sense hanging around here. We have much to do, and…"

"Shinpu-sama!"

At that moment the door of the temple was flung back and as one Tokimi and her companion turned, taking in the newcomer's appearance with some surprise and alarm. The man was breathless, red in the face from his hurried flight across the town and his clothing, ragged and scorched in places, was stained with the unmistakeable taint of blood. About his waist, his sash hung torn and loose, and the Priest's brow knitted together in consternation, crossing the floor to where the man stood.

"What has happened?" He said softly. "Why are you here like this, Masoto? What's wrong?"

"The Settlers, my Lord… the Settlers!" The man drew a harried, rasping breath into his exhausted lungs, gripping the Priest tightly around the wrists. "They've risen up against us, with weapons from the devil! Please, Shinpu-sama — you must come. You must come!"

"The Settlers?" Tokimi's eyes opened wide with alarm and fear, and Masoto nodded, bowing his head to his companion in a gesture of respect.

"Yes, Tokimi-sama. Already people have been killed… their weapons are like nothing on this World, and we don't know how to defend against them!"

"Then I must come." The Priest said quietly. "Tokimi-chan, I want you to stay here. I don't want you putting yourself in harm's way."

"No, Father. You know I can't." Tokimi's eyes were big with fear, but she shook her head. "If people are hurt… maybe I can help them. I have to try. And I know you can drive the Settlers away from our land — so I have to come with you! I must!"

“Tokimi, I’m not joking.” The Priest said gravely. “Masoto-san, please, stay with my daughter. Afford her as much protection as you are able. I must go and placate this threat to my people.”

With that his aura glowed and shone with a strange blue light, and he flickered and disappeared from the shrine complex.

Tokimi sank down onto a bier, biting her lip as she eyed Masoto in consternation.

“Have many people been harmed?” She whispered. Masoto nodded, settling himself on the floor before her.

“Sadly, enough.” He replied gravely. “My village and the one to the south of it have been entirely destroyed, with people fleeing for the hills. The Settlers truly have weapons from Hell — weapons that could destroy us all.”

“No, Father will stop them. Father will.” Tokimi said with certainty, though a shiver ran down her spine. “I know he will. He’ll protect everyone — that’s what the Priest does.”

“I have faith in him too, Lady Tokimi.” Masoto nodded his head. “Forgive me. I have seen family slain already today… I am not thinking with a clear mind.”

There was pain in his voice, and Tokimi sent him a horrified look.

“Family?” She echoed. “Ojisama…”

“My mother and father, and my little sister all.” Masoto said softly, and Tokimi could tell that he was holding back tears. “I was away from the centre when it happened, and when I returned…”

He faltered, shaking his head, and despite herself, a wave of indignation welled up inside Tokimi’s young heart. She got to her feet, moving across the shrine complex to where the flowers she had gathered still lay, awaiting the beginning of the religious ceremony.

“Tokimi-sama?” Masoto sounded concerned, and she turned back towards him, clutching a handful of blooms to her chest.

“I must follow Father.” She said softly. “I must go help him — him and anyone else who has been hurt. I can’t save your family, Masoto-san. But maybe I can make a difference. I am the last of the Inoue — there is noone else who could. I must go.”

“Tokimi-sama, your Father would never forgive me if I let harm befall you.” Masoto shook his head, moving to bar her way, but Tokimi was resolute and she gently pushed him aside.

“You are exhausted and struck with grief.” She murmured. “But you know that I must do what my people were born to do. I must try, Ojisama, even if it means I die. My mother and father gave me up to the Priest for this purpose, I know it… the World meant me to be here for this. To help our people, when our enemies attacked.”

“Tokimi-sama.” Masoto’s eyes glittered with respect, and he held up his hands. “Then I will hope your father forgives me for letting you pass. I have never heard you speak with such determination before, my Lady — but it brings me comfort to know that you do. The World chose well, when it chose to spare you from the famine and war of your people.”

“I hope you are right.” A faint smile touched Tokimi’s lips. “Thank you, Masoto-san. And if… if we don’t meet again, make sure that you serve my Father in all ways.”

Masoto bowed his head, and Tokimi pushed back the wood door, hurrying into the street. A dark cloud hung over the sky to the West, and as she headed in that direction, she became aware of glittering flares of light coupled with the fire and smoke of burning village homes. As she drew nearer, she recognised the sheen of a protective shield, and as she raised her gaze to the sky, she saw her father positioned between the Settler antagonists and the cowering, frightened population of a half-devastated village. Beneath the glow of his forcefield, the townsfolk watched in terror, some praying, some crying, some tending to their injured as the Settlers renewed their attack, aiming for the centre of the Priest’s shield. Tokimi faltered, watching as the shimmering aura around her father’s body strengthened and clarified, and her breath caught in her throat as she saw the unmistakeable shadow of blueish wings spread out across the sky around him, cloaking him in the light of the Eagle.

“The World’s spirit.” Tokimi whispered, pushing her hands together in a gesture of reverence as she stared at her father’s glittering body in awe and wonder. “Protecting his people, just as we always knew he would. Father, Washu was wrong… she was so wrong. You and this World, you have so much power. So much strength. To serve that Eagle — what could be more than that?”

As she watched, the Priest drew his hands together, sending out a glittering blast of blue and amber light, and in spellbound silence, Tokimi saw the Settler weapon explode into a flare of bright light, shards littering the landscape like shrapnel as despite themselves, the attacking forces drew back. Above their heads, lightning split the sky as grey clouds began to mass over their heads, rain falling to put out the village fires and create a mass of soggy ash from what had been a death-trap of smouldering timbers. Watching the scene unfold, Tokimi knew that the World was angry

because her Father was angry, and inwardly she quaked at the amount of energy that crackled through the atmosphere. As the Priest prepared a second bolt of energy, a bright white light shot out from one of the Settler contraptions, catching him square on and he let out a cry, the Eagle wings fluctuating and fading out of focus for the briefest of moments.

"Papa!" Tokimi leapt forward, as blood glittered through her father's clothing, spattering on the ground below. The Priest did not falter in his attack, however, drawing on his strength as he propelled a final, emphatic blast of light in the direction of the attacking Settlers. This time, there was no chance for withdrawal, as one by one the Settler contraptions exploded into nothing. Settlers who had stood their ground ready to fight blade-to-blade with the terrified Kii broke their formation, turning tail and fleeing for the safety of the Settler complexes and the bright domes that littered the Western landscape. In their confusion, they collided with one another, as the Kii villagers seemed to awaken from their stunned dazes. With a battle cry that could have rivalled any savage, they drew their own swords, charging at their enemy with renewed belief and Tokimi could see the fluttering green of the Ohira tribe leading the charge as they cut down fleeing men.

She bit her lip, making her way slowly down the hill towards the saved village as another bolt of lightning split apart the Kii skyline. As she did so, the glowing light surrounding her father's body flickered and faded from view and the Priest's body dropped like a stone to the ground below, falling with a heavy, awkward thud onto the scorched grasslands. Tokimi let out a cry of horror, hurrying forward as she grasped her Father's hands in hers, but even as she touched his skin, she knew beyond all doubt that he was past her help. Blood seeped through the teal of his tunic, turning it red to match his Hakubi sash, and as Tokimi put a hand against his pale skin, she realised that the final effort to drive back the Settlers had taken the last of his strength. Tears glittered on her lashes as despair washed over her, and she gripped hold of his hands more tightly, shaking her head as she struggled to come to terms with what had happened.

"Father." She whispered, her tears falling and mingling with the rain that soaked his lifeless, bloodstained body. "Father!"

"Tokimi-sama?" Masoto's voice from behind her made her turn, and at the sight of her expression, he dropped by the motionless Priest's side, making a gesture of reverence over the dead body of their leader.

"He died saving everyone." Tokimi choked. "He used all his strength, Ojisama. He… he saved Kihaku, but… but…"

She swallowed hard, dashing her tears away as yet more fell.

“But I didn’t think that the Priest could be killed.” She whispered. “I didn’t think Papa could die like this… not like this. Masoto-san — what can we do! How can we ever… how can the World…”

Masoto was silent for a moment, touching the body of his master tentatively. Then he turned, and Tokimi could see the grief and anger mingled in his fuschia eyes.

“The Settlers must pay for this.” He said softly. “For attacking our people… for slaying our Priest. They must be driven from Kihaku — they must be destroyed.”

Tokimi stared at him in alarm, and Masoto nodded his head.

“I mean it.” He said gravely. “If only the Priest’s daughter had lived. If only…”

“Washu!” Hope glittered in Tokimi’s eyes, and she scrambled to her feet. “Of course! Washu!”

“Tokimi-sama, Washu-sama is dead.” Masoto said gently. Tokimi shook her head.

“Maybe… maybe not.” She said unevenly. “Ojisama, take… take care of my Father’s body. Do all the things that you’ve been trained to do, as Scribe of the Priest’s Work. Take him and treat him with all the respect due a martyr Priest of this world… I beg you.”

“Of course, Tokimi-sama — but what are you going to do?” Masoto looked non-plussed. Tokimi frowned, clenching her fists as the lightning split the sky over her head for a third time.

“I’m going to try and find Washu.” She said softly. “And give Kihaku its Priestess.”

Tokimi’s eyes fluttered open, fear flickering in her sapphire eyes as she struggled to regain a sense of her environment. The vivid images that had haunted her dreams still taunted at her senses, teasing her about a lifetime that seemed so far away, and she shivered, tears glittering on her lashes.

“Father.” She whispered. “Is that what happened? Tokimi was with you, but she couldn’t help you? Tokimi is Inoue, but she could not heal the Priest?”

She hugged her knees more tightly to her chest, the ropes that bound her wrists and ankles digging into her skin as she glanced hopelessly around her dark, confined environment.

“And now Tokimi will die?” She murmured apprehensively.

“Because Tokimi… Tokimi was the one who killed Kihaku? Is that true? All these things I see — are they true things, or just bits of dreams? I wish I knew… I wish I knew!”

The clatter of the cage door startled her at that moment, and she shrank back against the stone wall of the cell as the divide creaked open, revealing a man dressed in the same uniform as the woman who had taken her prisoner. Vaguely Tokimi remembered encountering him once before, when she had been brought before the demon and accused of so many horrible things, but in her frightened panic, she could not remember his name. He stepped inside, grabbing her roughly by the arm and pulling her to her feet. She stumbled, letting out a cry of fear, and the man’s brows drew together as he landed a firm slap across her cheek.

“No noise.” He instructed, even as the tears began to stream down his captive’s cheek once more. “Come with me. Your fate is decided, and confirmed by Yuzuha-sama. As the traitor Priestess of Kihaku, and as the one responsible for insurrection on Rikishouki, you will be made an example of. Your death is upon us, Tokimi-sama. It will be less painful for you if you don’t fight.”

He spoke in derisive, sharp tones, and Tokimi swallowed hard against the rising sense of hysteria as she found herself forcibly dragged from her cell and along a dark, narrow passageway towards a cluster of other guardsmen and women, each standing to attention. As her escort approached, each saluted him sharply, and he returned the gesture with little ceremony, giving his prisoner a harsh shove as she fell heavily to her knees.

“Here is the one.” He said coolly. “Yuzuha-sama would have her taken to the usual place, to be bound to the stake and given to the flame, just as those have gone before her. We must make an example of the one who claims to be the cleanser Priestess of Kihaku. Yuzuha-sama has made her wishes clear. This wretch and all who support her on this World must be dealt with, as examples to the rest.”

“Yes, Captain Isao.” One of the men stepped forward, eying Tokimi hesitantly for a moment, then, “Captain, is she truly… the one? The one in the legend — the one who slew our ancestors and cleansed our World when the Settlers came?”

“She claims it, and Lady Yuzuha seems to believe it.” The man, who Tokimi now knew was Isao nodded his head. “Are you afraid, guardsman? Will you defy the orders of your mistress, because of some ancient superstitious legend? Kihaku is dead, and so is the power of the Eagle that resided within it. So Yuzuha-sama has assured

all of us — what power can a weak wretch of a girl have over any of us now?”

He reached out with his foot to kick Tokimi, as if to emphasise his point, and she gazed up at him with uncomprehending, reproachful eyes. “You see? She is ineffective. Driven mad, Yuzuha-sama believes. Follow your instruction, else you will be punished according to the Priestess’s will.”

“Yes, Captain.” The man agreed hurriedly, reaching down to haul Tokimi to her feet. “The cart is ready. We will do as you instruct — tell Lady Yuzuha that everything will be ready for her at the usual time.”

“Good.” Isao jerked his head in acknowledgement. “Do not fail in this — the Priestess has not been pleased by the loss of one of her people last night — she seeks to take full vengeance this morning and she will not tolerate any inaccuracies or failures. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Captain.” The man saluted again, and Isao offered Tokimi a cold smile, bowing towards her mockingly.

“We will not meet again.” He said quietly, and something in his tones filled Tokimi with icy dread. “I trust you will make a good death, Lady Tokimi. One which befits a Priestess — it is time you went to join the World you were once so keen to destroy.”

With that he was gone, and Tokimi found herself hauled up onto an unsteady cart, pinioned between the man who had answered Isao’s orders and a woman of similar age and build. She gazed around her in fright, unable to hold back her tears.

“Nii-chan.” She sobbed. “Where are you, Nii-chan. Where are you!”

At the sound of the unfamiliar, Galactic Tongue words, her companions reacted, exchanging fearful looks, and the man who had taken charge of her grasped her tightly by the hand.

“You will stay silent.” He said quietly, and though there was a firm note in his tones, Tokimi was aware of something more than coldness in his manner. “It will be easier for you, if you are.”

“Am I going to die?” Tokimi asked fearfully. The man nodded his head.

“Yuzuha-sama has decreed it.” He said heavily. “Noone can oppose the will of the Priestess.”

“But *Washu* is Priestess of Kihaku.” Tokimi protested. “Yuzuha is demon! She is bad! She is demon!”

“Hold your tongue, girl.” The woman shook her head admonishingly. “You are already marked for death… it will be a more traumatic process for you, if you continue to speak against the Lady Yuzuha in this way.”

Tokimi bit her lip, but obediently fell silent, glancing between her captors with a mixture of fright and uncertainty. Although they obeyed their orders, and she had no doubt that they would carry them out to the letter, they seemed almost reluctant in their manner, and with a jolt, Tokimi wondered if they really wanted to hurt her at all.

“But they will, because the demon says so.” She told herself sadly. “And Nii-chan… Nii-chan isn’t here to save Tokimi from Yuzuha. Tokimi did bad things, and Nii-chan… Nii-chan doesn’t want her any more. Not now he knows… Tokimi made him do wrong things, and… and he can’t forgive. Nii-chan… will you be glad when Tokimi is dead? And Washu… where is Washu? If she is not Priestess — is Washu-neechan already dead too?”

Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

First light.

Washu gazed up at the sky, watching with troubled green eyes as the first rays of the sun began to glitter over the horizon, bringing light to the landscape. Though she had been unable to sleep for fear of their hiding place being discovered, they had not been disturbed in the four or five hours they had sheltered there, and as she had thought things over, Washu realised that the meaning was clear.

“Either she thinks she’s dispensed with us, because of the chamber collapsing.” She muttered. “Or she hopes that we’ll make another attempt and she’ll be able to lure us into her web. But right now, I can’t focus on that. I’m more concerned by Tokimi — and whether or not she really could be on this wretched world. I never thought that I’d get so many people involved in trouble — but I guess I underestimated Tenchi and Ryoko. Someone did come to help me, after all — and Tenchi can’t fly that ship on his own, which means they must both be here. Maybe I should have more faith in the people I call family — and yet, if I’ve put them at risk… if I’ve put Tokimi at risk somehow by being here…”

She sighed, pulling herself to her feet as she paused to glance at her sleeping companions. Shouhei’s uniform was still scorched and stained with blood, but he slept evenly and quietly, and Washu was comforted by the colour in his cheeks.

“He’ll be all right, so long as we live through this.” She murmured. “Thank Goodness. I’m getting soft in my old age, but I couldn’t have sacrificed his life for mine.”

“Washu-sama?” At the sound of her voice, Mayuka stirred, blinking and rubbing her eyes as she struggled to regain a sense of her surroundings. “Where…?”

“Still in the palace grounds.” Washu said softly, coming to sit at her companion’s side. “Tadashi and Shouhei are still sleeping, so keep the volume down. This morning we have a lot to do, and they should rest while they can.”

“Noone has come after us?” Mayuka sounded surprised, and Washu shook her head.

“I think that this is part of Yuzuha’s plan.” She said quietly. “If she doesn’t believe we were crushed by falling stone — and I don’t think she’s that naive, to be honest with you — she expects us to make another attempt on her and her position here. So she’s sitting back and letting us do it — because she’s fairly confident she can kill us all, if we step too far into her territory. It’s a game of cat and mouse, that’s all. She’s waiting for us to become mice.”

“Mice bite.” Mayuka said darkly. “She might find that out before today is out.”

She stretched, stifling a yawn.

“Is your magic recovered?” She asked anxiously. “After last night — can you take her on, now?”

“I hope so.” Washu nodded her head, glancing down at the bracelets that still encircled her wrists. They glowed and shimmered at her attention, as if they understood her thoughts, and she frowned.

“These things make me feel so strange.” She murmured. “So involved in everything, emotionally and physically. I never felt that way before — but I’m starting to understand why saving and protecting the World became everything to both my father and my sister. The power of this rock is strong… very strong. Even though this is just a small fragment of Kihaku’s core, it changes how I feel about everything. To be bonded to it fully… no wonder Kihaku had the influence it did. For the first time ever, I understand my father in a way I never ever did while he was alive. And I’m sorry for it. If I’d known this then, maybe we wouldn’t have parted in the way we did. If I’d have understood exactly what it was that drove him…”

She faltered, shaking her head as she registered Mayuka’s confused expression.

“Never mind. It was too long ago, and it doesn’t matter.”

“What about Tokimi-sama? Are we going to go and see if Yuzuha was right?” Mayuka settled herself more comfortably beneath the tree. “Because traitors are executed at dawn. As soon as the sun is high in the sky… we don’t have much time.”

“No, we don’t, and yes, we are. Or at least, I am.” Washu nodded. “I want you to stay behind here, with Tadashi and Shouhei. Hide as best you can. If Yuzuha is setting a trap, I’d rather I fell into it on my own this time. Shouhei almost died once… and you and Tadashi could both have been crushed by that falling stone. If I can prevent you entering the firing line again, I will.”

“It seems cowardly, to let you go alone.” Mayuka frowned. Washu shrugged.

“Believe me, I’ve fought more battles alone than you’d care to know.” She said glibly. “It will just be another for the record book. That’s all.”

“Now that sounds like the mother I know and annoy.”

A fresh voice interrupted their conversation at that moment, and Mayuka let out a gasp, shuffling back against the tree’s trunk as two figures hazed into view before them, setting down on the grass as a small, fluff-eared cabbit leapt down onto the ground with a yowl of pleasure, rubbing affectionately up against Washu’s ankles.

“You have some serious explaining to do, Washu — and I mean serious explaining.”

“Ryoko?” Washu’s eyes widened with surprise. “Tenchi! Ryo-Ohki! But how did you find me?”

“I have no idea, and it doesn’t really matter.” Ryoko crossed the grass, grabbing her mother by the shoulders and shaking her briskly. “What the hell are you playing at, sight-seeing on strange rocks and putting my spaceship in danger? Have you any idea how hard it’s been to track you down?”

“Ryoko was worried about you. Well, we all were.” Tenchi glanced around him. “But I guess we should have known better — you seem to be fine.”

“Relative term.” Washu frowned, shaking her head. “It’s not so simple as that.”

“Washu-sama, who are these people?” Mayuka asked faintly. “What language is that? You know them… are they… from Jurai?”

“I didn’t understand the gibberish, but I swear she just called you… Washu-sama?” Ryoko raised an eyebrow, and Washu flushed red, looking discomfitted as for the first time her daughter took in her attire. “Yeesh, what the hell? We can’t leave you alone for a moment, can we! What is this, some kind of tribal fashion statement? What the Hell are you trying to be?”

“Step away from the Priestess!”

Shouhei’s voice interrupted the conversation at that moment and with a jolt of dismay Washu registered the teenager pushing himself in front of her, holding up his hands as he misinterpreted Ryoko’s actions. “Whoever you are — you shouldn’t speak that way to her!”

“What did he say?” Tenchi looked non-plussed, and Ryoko frowned, biting her lip.

“I think he called Washu a Priestess.” She said softly. “I don’t know how, but bits and pieces of what they say I can understand. It’s like… I don’t know what it’s like. But that bit of rock you gave me… it’s opening all kinds of channels and I’m seeing and hearing a bunch more than I usually do.”

“All right. This is getting weirder by the second.” Tenchi frowned. “Priestess? Washu, what’s going on, exactly? And Ryoko says you have my sword — how is that possible, when those guards took it?”

“The sword.” Washu’s eyes lit up with remembrance and she nodded her head, fumbling in her belt and holding out the hilt to her companion. “And I don’t have a lot of time to explain everything to you. Just tell me something — did Tokimi somehow come with you to this planet?”

“Tokimi?” Ryoko was startled. She nodded, and Washu’s heart sank. “Seiryo brought her because she could read the Kii letters. Sasami had a vision and it involved some kind of Kii prayer — something about death. Tokimi translated it, and got all freaked out because of it — so Seiryo got involved and brought Tokimi along as help.”

“So Seiryo is here too?” Washu bit her lip.

“And Miho-Kiyo. He dragged them into it, too.”

“Damn him.” Washu clenched her fists. “So Yuzuha… she might have been… Ryoko, where is Seiryo now? Where are the others?”

“Looking for Tokimi.” Tenchi said simply. “She got upset and ran off when Mihoshi said something about Kihaku being destroyed. Why?”

“Because Yuzuha has her as her prisoner, and she’s going to kill her as soon as the sun rises.” Washu said softly. Mayuka glanced between her Priestess and the newcomers, frowning as she reached up to touch Tenchi’s arm.

“You are the one who holds that sword, sir… so you are from Jurai?” She asked quietly. “That’s true?”

“What did she say?” Tenchi’s expression became blank, and Washu smiled.

“She wants to know if you’re from Jurai.” She said simply. “That’s all.”

“In a manner of speaking.” Tenchi looked startled, nodding his head so that Mayuka would understand his answer. “But I’m afraid I don’t really understand… any of this.”

“This planet is Rikishouki.” Washu said heavily. “Mayuka here is the planet’s proper heiress, but she’s been displaced and her family murdered by the demon Yuzuha, who is the one whose men took your sword in the first place. I retrieved it in a conflict last night, but in truth, she’s a very powerful creature and I’m not sure what it’s going to take to beat her. Tadashi and Shouhei here are loyal to Mayuka’s family, and I promised to help them free this world. The people here are Kii — survivors who left Kihaku on Juraian transport ships and who began a new life here when the ships crashed into this planet’s surface.”

“So they think you’re their Priestess, because they’re Kii and you’re a Hakubi.” Ryoko said slowly. Washu nodded her head.

“I said I’d help them.” She agreed.

“Why?” Ryoko frowned. “How is it your fight — I thought you abandoned your Kii roots already, Washu.”

“I did, but things have a habit of biting you when you least expect it.” Washu spread her hands. “The people here are suffering, Ryoko, and in a sense, they are still my people. I might not be a true Priestess, and I’ve done enough stupid things in the past to build an encyclopaedia of mistakes. But if I can help them defeat Yuzuha, I will. Especially if she seeks to hurt my sister. I’m not happy that Tokimi is here at all — and now I know she’s in trouble, I have to do something about it.”

“What’s going on?” Tadashi stirred, casting the newcomers a startled glance. “Are we discovered?”

“No, or not by the people we should fear.” Washu shook her head. “Tadashi, Mayuka, Shouhei — this is my daughter Ryoko, and her fiance, Tenchi Masaki. They’re family to me… and that’s why they’re here. To make sure I’m all right — however misguided that gesture might prove to be.”

“Your daughter.” Mayuka’s eyes became huge, and she gazed up at Ryoko in awe. “Oh!”

“Don’t look at me like that. You’re creeping me out.” Ryoko snapped, folding her arms across her chest. “Even if you’ve convinced Washu to dress up in that stupid hippy stuff, you are not going to get me to do it, so forget it now, all right? I’m a pirate, I’m not a Priestess.

We came here for one reason only — to find Washu and take her back to where she belongs. That's all. Nothing else."

She spoke quietly, and for a moment, Washu did not register what it was about her daughter's speech that had rung so strangely. Then her eyes widened, and she grabbed the girl by the hands.

"Ryoko, did you just speak in Kii?" She demanded. Ryoko's expression became one of bewilderment, as she realised that Tenchi was staring at her in disbelief.

"Did I?" She murmured. "How would I do that?"

She fumbled in her pocket, pulling out the chip of bluish rock that Tenchi had given her, and holding it out. "Is it… this? Something about it… told me where you were. And it was like… like I knew your thoughts and feelings, when I touched it. Like we were connected somehow."

"Kii stone." Washu bit her lip, nodding her head. "Well, my daughter, so your heritage wakes inside of you at long last, does it?"

"Well, I don't like it." Ryoko said pragmatically. "I don't want to speak in funny languages or… or read what's in your head, if it's all the same to you."

She held out the stone, dropping it into Washu's outstretched fingers. "You keep this. It belongs to your weird planet, after all — and I really don't."

"Washu-sama… are you leaving? You aren't going to abandon us?" Shouhei looked alarmed. Washu hesitated, then she shook her head.

"I gave you my word that I'd take Yuzuha down and I will keep my promise." She said gravely. "I'm going to the place Tadashi mentioned — the place where my sister might be. And I will make sure that Yuzuha can't hurt your people any more, Shouhei. I won't let you down again — I swear it."

She turned to her daughter and her companion, offering them a rueful smile.

"Now's the bit where I go to fight the baddie." She said off-handedly. "I promised them I'd fight for them, and I will, so I'd appreciate it if you'd hold the flight home until I'm done reconstituting a certain demon's DNA. It might take a while, and it could get messy."

"Then I guess we're coming with you." Tenchi said frankly, glancing at his sword as it glimmered and flared into a bright

translucent blade of light.

“It’s not your fight, Tenchi.” Washu shook her head, but Ryoko snorted.

“Don’t be stupid. Of course it is.” She said bluntly. “Do you think we came all the way here to let some demon make chopped mincemeat of you? Idiot. If it means we can leave this place more quickly, then we’re coming to give you a hand. No arguments. This is as much our fight as it is yours, now. And you might need our help.”

“I don’t want harm to befall Mayuka and the others either, you know.”

“Ryo Ohki will stay with them, if you like.” Ryoko suggested, and Ryo Ohki’s nose twitched at the sound of her name, her feathery ears flicking as if in acceptance of her duty. “When I need her, you know she’ll come, and if they’re in danger, she’ll let me know. But Tenchi and I are going where you are, Washu. There’s no discussion on the matter. It’s already decided.”

Washu faltered for a moment, then slowly she nodded her head, gratitude flickering in her green eyes.

“Then we haven’t much time to lose.” She murmured, flexing her fingers as her body was bathed in an ethereal blue light. “Even with the stone from Kihaku’s core augmenting my magic, I don’t know what kind of a battle this is going to be. Be on your guard, both of you — we don’t know what we’re going into, or what we might find when we get there!”

“It feels like we’ve been walking in circles all night.”

Mihoshi sighed, pausing to rub her ankles as she did so. “We don’t seem to be any further on than we were before… are we still somewhere near that weird village soldier place you found the stone for, Kiyone?”

“We’ve been trying to skirt around it, but it doesn’t seem possible. Not with the trees this dense.” Kiyone frowned, shaking her head. “Short of cutting them all down, I guess we have to go through it and hope for the best. The castle is on the other side — at least, if our theory works out. We need to get there somehow. If Seiryo’s right about Tokimi being a prisoner, that seems like the place she’d be.”

“I could hack a few branches with pleasure.” Seiryo pursed his lips. “I could use something to take my frustration out on.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Kiyone admonished. “How to draw attention to yourself, deforesting a planet!”

“Isn’t it like, sacrilege or something for a Juraian to cut down trees, anyhow?” Mihoshi asked unexpectedly, and Seiryo paused, staring at her in surprise.

“Pardon me?”

“Well, Jurai worships trees and stuff, right?” Mihoshi shrugged. “Isn’t it like killing your God, if you cut down a tree?”

“Believe me, Mihoshi, that only extends to trees on Jurai.” Seiryo said grimly. “*These* trees are in our way, and they’d be fair game. But I take the point about drawing attention to ourselves. Besides, we have made progress of one sort. Somehow we’ve managed to go completely around the side of the settlement — and now there’s a wide stretch of water between us and our target.”

He gestured, and Kiyone frowned as she saw the truth in his words.

“A river.” She murmured. “How did we manage to get here without crossing it before-hand? Or even seeing it, for that matter?”

“Best guess is that it’s hidden by the rise.” Seiryo glanced upwards, shielding his gaze from the glimmering morning sun. ‘In the dark we were lucky not to stumble into it. But I think that we’ve wasted a lot of time. If I’m right, we should have come this way originally. Somehow, running through thick forests and getting thrown off track by temples, we’ve come around full circle. The Unko is in that direction.’ He pointed. “And the ship key around my wrist is picking up it’s transmit signal, so it can’t be that far, either. Certainly not a day’s walk.”

“You mean to say that if we’d found the river before the trees, we’d have been here a lot sooner?” Kiyone’s eyes opened wide. “Ryoko didn’t mention a river, when we put down.”

“As I said, it’s probably hidden by the grassland and the lie of the terrain.” Seiryo shrugged. “This is one of the drawbacks of entering the planetary orbit of a civilisation too primitive to deal in digital mapping devices. We got lost.”

“So if we cross that river, we’ll get to the place we’re going to? The place near the castle?” Mihoshi asked. Seiryo nodded.

“That seems to be right.” He agreed. “If I’m picking up the Unko’s coordinates correctly, then it shouldn’t be too much further to go. Remember, Ryoko-sama did see the settlement from where we landed,

pretty much. It must be the same place — we must be on the right trail."

"Then we have to find a way to cross." Kiyone frowned. "Any ideas?"

"Kiyone! Seiryo, look!" Mihoshi's yell made both nobleman and detective turn, admonishments dying on their lips as they realised that she had found a sturdy, if make-shift wooden bridge, set at the highest point of the river bank as it stretched out over the waters below. Seiryo approached it cautiously, running his fingers along the rough rope that held it in place.

"It looks safe enough." He said doubtfully. "And as though it's been here a long time. I imagine we'd be all right crossing it."

"You don't sound totally convinced." Kiyone frowned. "What's up? Don't tell me you can't swim."

Seiryo snorted.

"Don't be stupid." He said witheringly. "Of course I can. But I think destroying a bridge and falling into the river might damage our undercover routine just a little bit."

"I think its safe enough." Mihoshi took a step or two onto the bridge, nodding her head. "Yep, it feels fine. It's quite fun, actually — just like basic assault course training. Come on, both of you. We're almost there and it's almost light and we want to rescue Tokimi, don't we?"

"Well, there's one way to find out." Seiryo shrugged. "Are you coming, Kiyone? Mihoshi is right. We're wasting time, and Tokimi might be in trouble the longer we dither here."

"I'm coming if you are." Kiyone returned neatly. "I'm not scared of wooden bridges, even if you are. Back home, my brother and I used to run riot over these kinds of things all the time, on our neighbour's land. It doesn't bother me one bit."

As if to prove her point, she stepped neatly onto the bridge, negotiating the uneven planking without a moment of hesitation, and Seiryo sighed, following suit as he made his way more carefully to the other side.

"There's no need to show off." He said archly, inwardly envying her swift movements. "Mastering heathen constructions is not something to be proud of. If anyone tried to produce something like this on Jurai, they'd probably be deported."

“And I thought you Elite Agents trained for all eventualities.” Kiyone bantered back. “My bad. I guess that’s just us Regulars who do that.”

“I’m not an Elite Agent.” Seiryo said evenly, as he reached the waiting detectives on the other side. “I’m a Lord of Jurai’s Court and that is all… you of all people should remember that, Kiyone.”

“Will you two stop it with the bickering? You’re giving me a headache.” Mihoshi pulled a face. “We’re on the other side — so now what do we do? Try and find a way around the outside of this settlement or what?”

“Going through the middle would be quicker, if we could manage it.” Kiyone murmured, glancing across at the edge of the small settlement as she did so. “So I think that’s what we’ll have to do, and hope it’s a busy throughfare or something. We might pass as ordinary folk, so long as we don’t speak to one another while we’re there.”

She cast Mihoshi a glare.

“Got that, Miho? Not a word.”

“Why look at me?” Mihoshi sounded hurt. “I can be quiet too, you know. I don’t always talk. And besides, you’re talking too, and so was Seiryo, just then. It isn’t just me making a noise, and…”

She stopped in mid-sentence, as Kiyone clapped her hands around her colleague’s mouth, sending her a dark look.

“And you’re babbling, which is exactly what I don’t want you to do.” She said evenly. “So stop it. All right? If they realise we’re from outside, it might get us all killed… and it sure won’t help Tokimi.”

“So we’re going in and hoping for the best.” Seiryo mused. “Honestly, I think I prefer it that way. If we’re going to fight, then I’d rather see my opponant face to face before I make him regret jumping me.”

“Not that you’re at all stuck on your own ability, or anything.” Kiyone muttered, and Seiryo shot her a look.

“You said be quiet.” He chided. “So you should lead by example.”

“Oh, you.” Kiyone bristled, but she obediently fell silent, and slowly they descended the hill towards the nearest of the odd looking buildings that encircled the military encampment. There was noone in sight, and Seiryo glanced around him, taking in the tell-tale signs of discarded weaponry. He sighed, half comforted and half alerted by the fact their presence so close to a military base did not seem to have

created any kind of stir.

As they edged cautiously around the edges of the old building, they heard a tremendous scream, followed by the harsh scolding of someone else in cold, unsympathetic tones, and a cold chill washed through the nobleman's heart as he registered what it meant.

"Tokimi-chan!"

He darted towards the sound, inwardly knowing that his ward was in danger, but Kiyone grabbed him by the arm, causing him to send her a dark look.

"What?" He snapped. "That's Tokimi! She's in trouble, Kiyone — stop holding me back!"

Kiyone looked at him for a moment, and Seiryo had the impression she was about to object to his decision. Then she frowned, shaking her head.

"Mihoshi and I will cover your trail." She said softly. "But be careful, okay? We don't know what kind of arms they have, and we don't know what we're up against."

"I'll be fine." Seiryo assured her. "If you girls cover me, then we'll all be all right. Thank you, Kiyone. I'll be careful, I promise."

Kiyone's frown deepened, but she nodded her head, releasing her grip on his sleeve and Seiryo crept forward, hand hovering over the hilt of his sword as he slipped between the buildings towards the sound of the disturbance. The sound of another scream pierced through him, as he made out the words his terrified ward was screaming.

"Nii-chan is here, Tokimi." He muttered. "So don't worry. I'm here and I'm not going to let anyone hurt you any more, I promise."

As he made this solemn vow, he rounded the corner, seeing for the first time the scene that was unfolding before him in the central square of the military settlement. A few feet from the forbidding black-stone statue that stood proud on the stone dais, a makeshift stake had been erected, and icy dread flooded Seiryo's entire being as he registered the crying, struggling figure that was being tightly lashed to the wooden structure, held forcibly in place by several uniformed men as a cloaked being supervised from a short distance away. He grasped his sword more tightly in his hand, flaring it into a blade as he prepared to leap into battle, then he hesitated, remembering Kiyone's words about risk and reckless judgement. He frowned, forcing himself to calm down.

“Kiyone is right.” He muttered. “If I dart in there without thinking, all that will probably happen is that I’ll cause harm to someone, and the risk is that that someone might be Tokimi. I can’t let that happen. I must be more cautious. But dammit, it’s such a pain. It’s times like this that I wish I was as clinical about things as I used to be. It’s all very well, having attachments to people, but when it clouds your judgement in this manner…”

“You monsters! Stop picking on her and let her go right now!”

Mihoshi’s voice startled him from his recriminations and he turned, seeing the detective standing in the middle of the village central street, weapon cocked and a look of determination on her face. A short distance behind her, her partner emerged slowly from her shelter, raising her own weapon as she cast her companion a long-suffering look of weary resignation.

“Galaxy Police!” She exclaimed. “Step away from Tokimi and hold your hands above your heads!”

The gathering around the would-be pyre hesitated at the sudden, unfamiliar shouting, and one or two of them seemed genuinely perturbed by the intrusion, stepping back from the stake in hesitation and fear. There was a moment of complete silence, then the cloaked figure, who until then had seemed detached from the whole scene stepped forward, putting herself neatly between her guardspeople and the two officers.

“Well. I didn’t think that the Galaxy Police patrolled this sector quite so diligently.” She spoke in soft, hoarse tones, and Seiryo’s eyes widened in surprise as he realised he could understand her language. “But you really should have saved yourself the trouble. This planet does not recognise interference from your organisation. Intrusion is not welcome here… and you are interrupting a rite of justice proclaimed and supported by the people of this world. Step aside, both of you, or my men shall consign you to the same fate.”

“Who are you, and what do you want with Tokimi?” Kiyone stepped cautiously forward, still holding her gun up as she did so. “You’re misinformed, whoever you might be. The Galaxy Police exist to protect the innocent, and we’re here to take Tokimi home with us.”

“The innocent, you say?” The figure seemed amused. “Do you know who this woman is, Detective? Clearly you have no idea what she was. There is nothing innocent about her. She is a killer — a vengeful, murderous witch who slaughtered the lives of her entire planet in her desire to destroy Tsunami. She is the reason my people came here, to

this remote, impoverished rock — the few survivors who escaped her darkness to rebuild their civilisation. She is Kihaku's traitor, and I am their justice. I am Yuzuha, Priestess of Rikishouki. And Inoue-no-Tokimi's crimes must be punished."

"Tokimi's brain is broken! She doesn't understand and you're mean, trying to hurt her just because she did a bad thing in the past!" Mihoshi objected hotly, firing off her weapon in her indignation and the bullet ricocheted off the black stone statue, chipping the edge of the cape and causing several of the already jittery guardsmen to mutter among themselves, glancing at Tokimi in alarm as if they believed she was the cause of the interference. Tokimi herself had long since given herself up to her tears, and at the sight of her, Seiryo's heart once more constricted with anger.

"Keep them busy, both of you." He muttered. "While they're distracted, I'm going in."

To think was to act, and Seiryo dropped carefully to the ground, finding that the raised platform that bore the statue and the stake hid him adequately from view as he crawled along the dirt-packed ground. Clouds of dust wafted up in his face and he swallowed hard, trying his best not to choke and give away his position as he heard the cloaked figure challenge his companions once again.

"You have no right to interfere in the proceedings of Rikishouki." The voice was cold and almost bored, Seiryo decided, as if she didn't really consider the Galaxy Police any threat to her position. "You are getting tiresome, and delaying my business here."

She raised her hands, barking out some order in the strange, gutteral tongue that Seiryo recognised as Kii, and immediately the guards that had surrounded the bound Tokimi surged forwards, pulling blades from their belts as they converged on the two detectives. Seiryo heard Kiyone curse, and he ducked down just in time as another bullet careened across the stone dais.

"Stop or we'll shoot you and it will really, really hurt if we do." That was Mihoshi, and Seiryo knew she was already priming her weapon for a third shot.

"I had no idea her aim was so terrible." Seiryo gritted his teeth, glancing up as he realised he was within reach of the wooden bonfire and that Tokimi was almost in his grasp. "At this rate, she'll shoot Tokimi, and that's no better than me dashing in unprepared. I'm starting to see what Kiyone means when she talks about Mihoshi's heart ruling her head — and yet, considering all that Tokimi and I did

to her in the past, that she's putting herself in danger to help us both means a lot. I won't waste the opportunity. It's time they understood that there are three people fighting this battle for Tokimi's freedom. Not two."

He clambered up behind Tokimi, slicing his blade carefully through the thick rope that had bound her and she tumbled forward onto her knees with a thump, tears still streaming down her cheeks. Carefully he inched around the wood-piled structure, placing his hand on her arm and she glanced up, seeing him for the first time. For a moment she didn't speak, then she flung herself on him, burying her head in his shoulder as she clung to him tightly.

"Nii-chan." She sobbed. "Nii-chan came! Nii-chan came!"

"Of course I did." Seiryo assured her. "Can you stand, Tokimi? I need to get you out of here — and then I have to help Kiyone and Mihoshi deal with our friends."

"Stop right there, stranger."

The voice startled him and he glanced up, meeting the glittering eyes of the cloaked figure as she gazed down at him. "This girl is a prisoner of Rikishouki. She belongs to me, and to the people of this world. Those who help her will be condemned just as she is for her crimes — you have no business interfering in justice."

"Killing a helpless girl is not justice." Seiryo snapped back coldly, prising himself free of Tokimi's grip as he held out his sword, brandishing it firmly in the figure's direction. "I don't care if you're a Priestess or a monster from Hell. You will not lay another finger on her, do you understand me? She has the protection of the Emperor of Jurai!"

"The Emperor of… *Jurai*?" The woman's eyes narrowed, and for the briefest moment, Seiryo had the impression that something other than human features lurked beneath her dark cape. Behind him, he could hear Tokimi's terrified whimpers and his resolve hardened as he stepped resolutely in front of his charge, shielding her from the demon's view completely.

"Yes." He said softly. "The Emperor of Jurai *and* the Lady Tsunami, both of whom I serve. Whoever you are, you will pay for hurting Tokimi like this."

"It seems that Jurai has not lost interest in the Kii, after all." The woman said serenely. "They have long believed that a Priestess will come to save them all… but the Priestess is their destroyer, allied with

Jurai and surrounded by pretenders and false promises. No wonder the people of this planet were so easy to overcome. They have been deceived for generations — believing in a being that simply does not exist!"

"She exists, Yuzuha."

A fresh voice interrupted the conversation at that point, and Seiryo's eyes widened as a form shimmered and glowed into view before them, her hands clasped together as her outline became more and more defined. Thick red hair flitted out around her face in a loose, unfettered style, beads glittering in amongst the thick waves and across her scalp as if in place of a coronet. She was dressed in flowing robes of cream, bound at the waist with a wide red sash and about her throat sparkled the gold of an old, engraved pendant. Around her wrists, blue-crystal armlets glittered and shone with a light and energy reflected in the woman's vivid green eyes, and somehow her very existance seemed ethereal. On the ground before her, spreading wings stretched out across the dark shape of her shadow, and despite himself, Seiryo swallowed hard at the sight of them, as memories of a past encounter with such magic flitted briefly through his mind. Behind the spectre, Ryoko and Tenchi hazed into view, but for once Seiryo was unable to focus on the fact that reinforcements had arrived. Behind him, Tokimi struggled to her feet, grasping at his shoulder for support as she stumbled forward.

"Onee-sama." She murmured. "You're safe!"

Her words were Kii, but somehow Seiryo understood their meaning as the glowing being set down gracefully on the wooden dais, facing the cloaked figure with a cold, impassive gaze.

"You can insult me all you like, Yuzuha." The apparition continued quietly. "But you will *not* harm my little sister. Tokimi's crimes were the crimes and will of the Eagle of Kihaku, and are not yours to judge. You have no business being here. You are a parasite to these people, just as others sucked the life and sanity from Kihaku when I was just a girl. You are that darkest of beings — a true demon — and I will *not* let you continue to hurt the people of Rikishouki!"

"*Washu*?" Seiryo found his voice at this moment, staring at his friend in disbelief. The vision turned for a moment, her glittering green eyes resting on his face and Seiryo saw reserve and disapproval in her gaze. She did not say anything, however, turning her attention back to the matter at hand.

"You again." Yuzuha reacted angrily, flexing her fingers as her aura

glittered and shone with evil light. “I thought I’d already dispensed with you — the imposter who sought Juraian friendships over that of her own people!”

“I won’t pretend I’ve always made the right choices where the Kii are concerned.” Washu said quietly. “But I’m no imposter. My name *is* Hakubi-no-Washuu, Yuzuha. My father *was* the Priest of Kihaku. And I am his heiress by the blood that courses through my veins.”

She raised her arms further, as light danced out from the stone bracelets.

“Kihaku’s soul lives in the stone of this meteorite… expelled from the World as an omen to its people.” She said softly. “It confirms what you try to deny — that whether you like it or not, the magic reacts to my body as though it were meant to be bonded with it beyond any connection you can ever have to this world. My father named me Eagle’s Feather, because I am blood of the Hakubi and I am the Eagle’s representative among the Kii. I have come to do what I should have done a long time ago — protected my people from scum such as you.”

As she spoke, her body became enveloped in a glittering light, as sparks of both blue and amber flared out around her, surging across the ground towards where Yuzuha stood. The demon cursed in a dark, unintelligible tongue, leaping out of the way of Washu’s blast and only narrowly avoiding being hit.

“If you want me, you’ll have to come and find me, Priestess or not.” She said darkly. “They aren’t your people, they’re *mine* — and I’ll soon teach you that with or without the divine magic of your World, you and your tribe are merely a legend on a sheet of parchment — dead, gone and without hope of ever defeating me.”

With that she vanished in a haze of red light, and Washu let out a heavy sigh, dropping her hands as the aura faded from around her body.

“Washu! You’re all right! You’re all right!” Mihoshi ran forward, forgetting for a moment the gathered guardsmen, most of whom had watched the entire encounter without understanding any of it. One of them lurched towards her, reaching out to strike her with her blade, but Ryoko was too quick for him and a volley of red-orange light sliced through the morning air, knocking the sword out of her hand with a heavy clatter.

“The next time someone tries something like that, it won’t be their sword that gets zapped.” She said firmly, raising her hands in a warning gesture. Although they did not understand her words, there

was no mistaking her meaning, and the remaining guardsmen took several steps back from the poised Detectives. Several of them withdrew into the shadows of the surrounding houses, the others dropping to their knees as an awkward silence descended over the village square.

“Washu.” Seiryo frowned, coming towards her, but Washu turned, shaking her head slowly.

“I have things to do. Not now, but we’ll talk later.” She said quietly. “And I’ll have things to say about Tokimi being brought into this mess, Seiryo. But for now I have something else I have to see to.”

“Are you going after her again?” Tenchi demanded. Washu nodded.

“I have to.” She said with a sigh. “As it stands, Mayuka and the others aren’t as well hidden as they could be, and I thought it would be safer if they stayed within the castle walls. But I was wrong — and I have to track her down. I promised them I wouldn’t let anyone get killed and I’m going to keep that promise no matter what happens along the way.”

“Then we’ll stick with you.” Ryoko said firmly. Washu shook her head, but Ryoko folded her arms across her chest.

“I’m coming whether you like it or not, and Tenchi and I, we work as a team.” She said frankly. “Didn’t we already tell you this? That’s just how it works, so stop arguing. You’re wasting time.”

Washu faltered for a moment, then she spread her hands.

“If that’s how you feel.” She said with a shrug. “I won’t waste the energy fighting over it.”

“Miko… sama?” As they prepared to leave, one of the disarmed guardsmen stumbled forwards, dropping to his knees before the scientist and raising a curious, awed gaze to hers. “Are you… are you truly the one? Hakubi-no-Washuu? Are you… her?”

Washu nodded her head solemnly, and the man bowed his head, fear and apprehension on his weathered features.

“Forgive us, Miko-sama.” He whispered. “Please, forgive us.”

“There is nothing to forgive… not from you.” Washu shook her head, reaching out to gently raise him to his feet and he gazed up at her with a look of reverence. She dimpled, and for an instant Seiryo saw the cheeky scientist deep within the Priestess’s visage.

“I’ve been away too long, and I’m sorry to have abandoned you all

when you've been forced to live in fear." She murmured. "But I'm here now, and I promise, things are going to change. I will rid Rikishouki of the demon. You have my word."

She paused, then held out her hands to her daughter and the Prince.

"Let's go." She said simply. "I think I know where Yuzuha's headed — and we want to find her before she regains her full strength."

"Oneesama!" Tokimi held out a hand to her sister, and Washu sent her a slight smile.

"Be good, stay safe, and make sure Seiryo looks after you." She said softly. "I'll see you soon, imoto-chan. I promise."

With that her body hazed and glittered out of view, Tenchi and Ryoko disappearing with her, and Seiryo bit his lip, turning to face the sorry figure of his charge with ashamed eyes.

"No doubt I'll deserve everything she has to say to me, too." He murmured, more to himself than to his companion as he held out his hand to haul the girl to her feet. "But you're alive, and safe, and that's what matters."

"Should we go after her? Should we try and help Washu take on that weird caped Yuzuha woman?" Kiyone mounted the dais at that moment, casting a glance behind her at the still-dazed guardsmen as she did so. "I've no idea what Washu said to them, but whatever it was, it seems to have rendered them pretty harmless."

"Tokimi?" Seiryo glanced at the young Kii, who swallowed hard, reaching up to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"Nee-chan told them she was Priestess." She said unevenly. "And… and that she would make the demon go away. That's all."

"She wasn't… wasn't like Washu." Mihoshi said slowly, thrusting her gun roughly back into its holster and narrowly missing shooting herself in the foot as she did so. "Woah! I swear that I thought the clip was on — how weird is that? But don't you think so — she wasn't like our Washu just then. Her hair, and how she was dressed — are we *sure* she's really our Washu?"

"Tokimi would have known, if she wasn't." Seiryo said gravely. "But I know what you mean. Washu has always fought against this idea of being the Priestess of Kihaku. Yet here we are, on a planet that isn't Kihaku, and now…"

"Washu's facing up to her past, isn't she." Kiyone said thoughtfully.

“This is the Washu we’ve none of us ever known — except maybe Tokimi, once upon a time. It’s the Kii Washu — the one she left behind when she became Professor Hakubi and started messing with the universal laws of science.”

“I think she looked… kind of beautiful.” Mihoshi looked wistful. “Don’t you think? Not scary and sort of overworked like she sometimes does — but powerful. Strong. And really pretty.”

“She did.” Seiryo acknowledged. “But I’m not sure about her not being frightening, Mihoshi. I have a feeling that that Washu is still very much around. I don’t think we should go after them, no. I think they’ll be fine without us, and besides, I think we should get Tokimi back to the Unko. We’ve… no, *I’ve* put her in enough danger. I won’t put her in any more if I can help it.”

“Then we go back there and wait for them to join us?” Kiyone asked. Seiryo nodded.

“I think so.” He agreed. “We can send a signal to Jurai so that people know that we’re safe — and that Washu seems to have everything under control here after all. We’ll wait for the full explanation till later… for now, I think that is our best course of action.”

“Can Tokimi manage?” Kiyone eyed the girl in concern. “She looks pretty ragged. Tokimi, are you all right?”

“Tokimi… Tokimi wants to go home.” Tokimi said softly.

“Toki-chan, Kihaku is gone.” Seiryo bit his lip. “I’m sorry… but it is.”

“No.” Tokimi shook her head. “Tokimi… Tokimi doesn’t want… Kihaku. Tokimi… wants… Suki and… Nii-chan and… and Jurai.”

“*Jurai*?” Seiryo stared, and Tokimi raised melancholy blue eyes to her companion.

“Tokimi wants to go back.” She whispered. “And be… be like before. With Suki and Nii-chan and Sasami and everyone is happy. On Jurai, like… like before.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.” Seiryo held out his hand to her, but Tokimi hesitated, shaking her head as she took a step back from him. Seiryo frowned, confusion flooding his gaze as he tried to interpret the tragic expression on her face.

“Tokimi?” He murmured. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

Tokimi did not answer, and Seiryo eyed her in consternation.

“Are you cross with me for putting you in danger?” He asked gently. “Because I apologise, if that’s so. You’ve every right to be angry — I should not have brought you here and I should not have let you get seperated from us.”

“Tokimi is sorry.” Tokimi swallowed hard. “Tokimi is… is bad person. Is… is a demon, like… like Yuzuha.”

“Tokimi, you’re not a demon.” Kiyone said gently, as Seiryo stared at his ward in horror. “Not even a little bit. So you mustn’t think that, okay? Whatever that woman said to you, don’t take it to heart. *She’s* the demon. Not you.”

“But Tokimi… Tokimi…” Tokimi faltered, then grasped Kiyone by the hands, true anguish in her unusual blue eyes.

“Tokimi wanted Kiyone-san to die.” She whispered. “And… and she made Nii-chan… she made Nii-chan… and Kihaku was… and Sasami came and… and Tokimi is sorry! Tokimi did bad things and now… now…”

Her voice wavered as the tears threatened once again and Kiyone, who had stared at her in surprise at her words seemed to gather herself, hugging the girl tightly as she shook her head.

“I have never blamed you.” She said softly, meeting Seiryo’s stricken gaze with a sombre one of her own over Tokimi’s shoulder as she did so. “You weren’t yourself, and you couldn’t help the things that happened. This you is the real Tokimi, I know that. So don’t be sorry. You did nothing wrong, Tokimi. It was the spell that did bad things — to you and to Seiryo. And now the spell has gone, so it’s all right. You told me on Jurai you wanted to be friends, right? Well, so do I. We can be friends, now the bad magic has left you alone.”

“Kiyone-san… isn’t mad?” Tokimi raised big eyes to her companion, hope flickering briefly in her gaze, and Kiyone shook her head.

“Not at all.” She assured her. “So you mustn’t be, either. And we should start making our way back to the Unko, all right? You’re dirty and messy and you’ll feel better when you’ve had a bath. Your hair’s all tangled, Tokimi — I’m sure Mihoshi and I can help you fix it, even if Seiryo doesn’t know one end of a ribbon from another.”

At this Seiryo gathered his wits, gratitude flickering in his gaze as he nodded his head.

“Let’s go back.” He murmured. “Tokimi, if you’re tired, I’ll carry you… I don’t mind. And Kiyone is right… what she said is true.”

He fumbled in his pocket for the ship’s key, holding it out to the Detective, who took it, glancing at him in surprise.

“You and Mihoshi go on ahead. Open up the ship and get in contact with the people who need to know.” He said quietly. “I’ll bring Tokimi. If you don’t mind — I’d rather it was that way.”

Kiyone’s eyes lit up with comprehension and she nodded, grasping the key tightly.

“I’m with you.” She said softly. “Come on, Miho. We’re the advance party — we’ll go radio Headquarters, Jurai and the Earth, let them know what’s going on. Seiryo’s going on an ego trip and he wants to defend Tokimi himself this time, so we’ll let him deal with any trouble on his own… I’m getting cold out here, and the ship will be nice and warm.”

Mihoshi shivered, nodding her head.

“That sounds good to me.” She said decidedly. “Lets go!”

Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

"So, they come."

Yuzuha materialised in the middle of her chamber, anger glittering in her eyes as she ran her mind back over the confrontation in the square. "They come, and they seek to defeat Yuzuha on her own chosen territory. Well, they are fools. In the sunlight, perhaps I am weak enough to be affected by their base magics… but I am no ordinary opponant. Here, in the depths of my castle — they will not leave here alive."

She narrowed her gaze, bringing her hands together as Isao blurred into view before her, looking confused and then afraid as he registered the expression on his mistress's face.

"Yuzuha-sama? You sent for me?"

"Yes." Yuzuha curled a claw-like hand in his direction, beckoning her to join him. "Listen to me carefully, Isao. The Priestess and her followers have managed to evade the restraints of your men. This is only possible because of treason among the pathetic beings that live here… and I will not tolerate it."

"Treason?" Isao looked startled, then, "But who would dare oppose your will, Priestess?"

"Fools who believe in Juraian illusions." Yuzuha spat out, her form shimmering as anger rippled through her body. "But it does not matter. I shall take care of them once and for all… have no fear of that."

"And me, my Lady? What would you have me do?" Isao asked hesitantly. Yuzuha rested her hand on his shoulder, offering him a slight smile as she drew back her cloak, revealing for the first time her true form. Despite himself, her companion let out a gasp, reeling away from her, and Yuzuha laughed.

"You are not serving any ordinary mistress." She said softly. "And to disobey me would be a very bad mistake to make, Isao. I rely on your loyalty — but I will know if you fail. And believe me, if you do, death will be a mercy, not a punishment."

Isao's eyes widened with alarm, and Yuzuha nodded.

“You understand me.” She said evenly. “Good. Then you will do as I ask?”

“Yes… yes, mistess.” Isao gathered himself, bowing his head towards her, and Yuzuha smiled, patting him condescendingly on the head.

“Good boy.” She reflected. “I knew that of all of this heathen people, you were gifted with the most survival sense.”

“What is your will, Priestess?” Isao asked quietly, and Yuzuha was gratified by the lingering fear in his gaze. She pursed her lips, her aura flickering as she contemplated.

“They will be here soon.” She said simply. “The traveller and her allies — I sense magic on the wind. But the Priestess — Tokimi. She is not with them. I want you to find her, Isao. And no matter what you have to do to achieve it, you *must* kill her. I do not care who you slay in the process — your friend, your brother, your fellow Kii. Tokimi must be punished and she must be put to death. You must not allow her or her ungrateful associates to escape. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Miko-sama.” Isao gabbled hurriedly, bobbing his head once more. “I will do as you ask. I will destroy Tokimi-sama, just as you say.”

“Good.” Yuzuha’s eyes glittered. “Then go. And when you have done, join the search for Tadashi and his traitor companions. We will have a bloodbath and we will show the people of this world what happens to those who oppose the will of Rikishouki’s priestess, once and for all!”

With that she flexed her hands, watching in satisfaction as Isao glittered and disappeared into nothing.

“He is a fool, but he is loyal and he will do as he is bidden.” She murmured softly. “That wretch of a girl won’t last long, even if she does have the protection of the Galaxy Police. Isao will not dare disobey my orders… they’re all as good as dead. And with my men searching the palace grounds for Tadashi and his companions, it won’t be long before I can bring them before my throne and declare justice on them, too. Rikishouki will have its sacrifice, after all — and then noone will ever think to question me again!”

“Are you sure that you don’t want me to carry you?”

Seiryo shot his companion a doubtful look as they made their way

carefully out of the military village, towards the racing river and it's sturdy wooden bridge. "Tokimi, you look shaken — are you certain you're steady on your feet?"

"Tokimi is fine." Tokimi nodded her head, her arm slipped tightly in her companion's as she offered him a smile. "Now Nii-chan has helped Tokimi, Tokimi isn't scared. And Tokimi… isn't so very tired. Not now. Not really."

"Tokimi." Seiryo paused, then he sighed, shaking his head slowly. "Toki-chan, I'm sorry. For a lot of things, including bringing you on this little trip. But most of all for the fact that Suki and I kept things from you. It was wrong of us — you had a right to know."

Tokimi's eyes became shadowed, and she sighed, pursing her lips as she kicked absently at the dirt beneath their feet.

"Kihaku is dead." She said softly. "Tokimi… Tokimi remembers it. The World really is gone, isn't it? This is different planet. Not Kihaku."

"Right." Seiryo agreed. "I'm afraid so."

"It's all right." Tokimi sighed again. "It's all over now."

She sent him a troubled glance, then,

"Tokimi was alone on Kihaku for such a long time." She murmured. "Alone except for the World. Bit by bit, Tokimi didn't exist any more. Tokimi couldn't think, couldn't act, couldn't understand things any more. Tokimi… Tokimi died on Kihaku, didn't she? Tokimi was Priestess and Tokimi died."

"You didn't die, Toki-chan." Seiryo shook his head. "If you had, you wouldn't be here now, would you?"

"I don't know." Tokimi frowned, and for a moment Seiryo had the impression he was talking to someone fully in possession of all her faculties. "I think… I think the World became Tokimi, and Tokimi went away. Deep, deep down inside, like asleep. Tokimi… Tokimi was all eaten away, and there was only the World left. The World was angry, and it hurt such a lot… it made Tokimi disappear."

Seiryo frowned.

"I don't quite understand what you mean." He owned. "But whatever happened then, Tokimi, it wasn't your fault. And noone blames you for those things, not at all. Least of all me."

"Nii-chan?"

Tokimi eyed him questioningly, and Seiryo turned, meeting her

gaze with an affectionate one of his own.

"Yes?"

"Why do you look after Tokimi?" His companion asked plaintively. "Why does Nii-chan always help Tokimi, when Tokimi was bad to Nii-chan? Tokimi was not Nii-chan's friend. Tokimi hurt Nii-chan a lot. Why are you so kind to me now? Why do you and Suki help Tokimi?"

"Because we're both pretty fond of you." Seiryo's lips twitched into a smile at this. "It's as simple as that. Like I said, noone blames you for what went before. And I'm by no means innocent either, Tokimi. We've both made mistakes, because of the magic that infected us. But it's all in the past. You and I, we share a bond because of that experience. Who else should take care of you, if not us? Besides…"

He hesitated, then made up his mind, nodding his head.

"Besides, it was my ancestor who first invaded your planet, all those years ago." He added quietly. "In a way, it's my family's fault your World died and all those things happened. If nothing else, the Tennan family owe it to Kihaku to take care of their survivors, don't you think so?"

Tokimi was silent for a moment, digesting this. Then she raised her gaze to his again, and Seiryo was relieved to see that some of the darkness had gone from the depths of her sapphire eyes.

"Nii-chan is not ancestor." She said softly. "And Tokimi is not World. We have lives now, yes? On Jurai? Past is all gone now. World is gone, too. Nii-chan's ancestor gone. And Tokimi wants to stay with Suki and Nii-chan always. I don't want to ever be alone again. I want to be with you."

"Then that's how it will be." Seiryo grinned at her. "And yes, you're right. The past is past, and things happened then that were out of both of our control. We can't change those things, but we can move on. And we are, which is why we're going to go back to the Unko and then home to Suki and Sasami. All right?"

"All right." Tokimi nodded her head determinedly, and Seiryo felt slim fingers slip into his own, squeezing his hand tightly. "Tokimi is coming to Seiryo's spaceship now. I won't be afraid, because we're going to go home."

"Right." Seiryo agreed. "I…"

He paused, a frown crossing his features as he thought he heard a sound from behind them. He pulled his charge to one side, glancing

back the way they had come, but he could see nothing.

“Nii-chan?” Tokimi sounded anxious, and Seiryo shook his head.

“I’m on edge, but I could’ve sworn I heard someone behind us.” He murmured. “And I think it’s going to rain, by the looks of it. Damn this planet’s primitive weather systems! Our best bet is to quicken our pace and get back to the ship as soon as we can, all right? Catch up to Mihoshi and Kiyone and get aboard the Unko ready to leave. Can you manage that?”

“Yes.” Tokimi nodded her head, and Seiryo saw determination cross her face. “Tokimi will do what Nii-chan says.”

“Then let’s go.” Seiryo said briskly. “Followers or not, I’ve no mind to be caught out in a tropical downpour longer than is absolutely necessary!”

“This castle has more corridors than a spider’s web has strands.”

As they re-materialised in the ground floor of the expansive stone building, Ryoko gazed around her in displeasure, light glittering from her fingertips as she surveyed their surroundings. “Tenchi and I only found you because I had a sudden sense of where you were, Washu — but now we’re looking for that demon bitch, where do you suppose we begin? This place is huge… and all the hallways look the same.”

“Plus we don’t know how many of her people she has on guard around this place.” Tenchi added, his hand brushing against his sword hilt as he spoke. “They could be watching us — we need to decide on strategy, and get this over with.”

He bit his lip, then,

“Washu, are you planning on killing this Yuzuha woman?” He asked hesitantly. Washu sighed, glancing at her hands as a faint bluish glow encircled them. Slowly she nodded her head.

“I imagine I’ll have no choice.” She said heavily. “Yuzuha is a demon, Tenchi. She’s not just called a demon. She is a demon. Father used to say that such creatures were born out of the negativity and greed of people… and I’m starting to wonder if it was true. Yuzuha came here after being driven away from Jurai by some force or other — what force, it doesn’t say, but I’d wager Tsunami’s pure and peaceful magic was a part of it. She settled here and was able to take control like she has because these people are not as peaceful as they seem to be. She’s drawn on their fear of invasion and their mistrust of strangers and with it, she’s grown in strength. That’s why she’s weak

against light, and strong in the darkness. Beating her is not a case of simply blasting her to pieces. She won't be killed so easily as that. I may have no choice but to use the strongest Kii spells I know against her — those I used against Yugi Kuroda, when she was haunting Ayeka on Jurai."

"You're going to exorcise her?" Ryoko's eyes became wide with surprise, then, "No, I suppose that does make sense. But you shouldn't look so stressed, Washu. That magic didn't kill Yugi — it just took care of her so that Jurai could deal with her properly."

"But Yugi was human, albeit twisted and evil." Washu sighed. "Like I said, Yuzuha is not. I think it might make a difference. And there's another thing. I'm not even sure my magic is strong enough to take her on. But I have to try… and I have a feeling I know where she'll be waiting. Follow me, both of you. There's one chamber in this place Yuzuha seems to consider home from home."

"So it's the negative energy of these people that makes Yuzuha so strong?" Tenchi questioned, as they followed her through the narrow hallways, cautiously checking for enemy soldiers at every turn. "Are you sure?"

"I wasn't to begin with, not wholly." Washu shook her head. "But then, when we were down underground last night…"

She pursed her lips.

"Yuzuha attacked me, but Shouhei saved me from her blast. He dived at me, and took the force of the blow in my place." She said softly. "It should have killed him, but it did not. When I asked him why he did such a thing, he said it was because he had faith in me. I think that faith — that hope in me being here — preserved his life. And more, it made me certain that the only way to defeat Yuzuha is to dispel that negativity. For that… for that I need the power of my father's tribe. I need to be able to nullify her, but also, I need to make the people surrounding her believe that I am the Priestess and I am here to help them. So… I must do what I have to do."

She paused, eying them sadly.

"You don't need to come further, now you know that." She added. "Though I'm grateful to you both that you came all this way to find me."

"What else were we going to do?" Tenchi looked confused. "Leave you in the middle of nowhere when you might be in trouble? Don't be stupid, Washu."

“Why are you so determined to fight these things on your own, anyway?” Ryoko demanded. “Is this some kind of hang-up from your past or something? Or what? Because it’s really getting on my nerves now. For a genius, sometimes you can be really, really dumb. We didn’t come all this way to look at the pretty scenery, you know. We came to get *you*, and whether you like it or not, that’s what we’re going to do. If that means fighting some monster demon woman, then fine, I could use a bit of target practice. But you can take it from me here and now — Tenchi and I are *not* leaving this dump of a planet without you. Do you understand now, or do I have to spell it out for you again?”

Washu’s eyes widened as she glanced at her daughter, and then she smiled, nodding her head.

“All right.” She said flippantly, though a flicker of light in her green eyes gave away her true feelings. “Then Yuzuha is probably in the chamber right ahead. And more, I suspect she’ll be waiting for us to make our move — so be ready, both of you.”

Tenchi glanced at his sword, pulling it once more from his belt and flaring it into life.

“Ready when you are.” He said simply. “Are we going in?”

“We’re going in.” Washu exchanged looks with her daughter, then nodded her head, holding out a hand to each of her companions and grasping their fingers tightly in hers. “My way is quicker, and we’ll more likely catch her by surprise. Hang on tightly, you two. This won’t take long.”

“Washu, if you’re going to…” Ryoko began, but before she could finish Washu had closed her eyes, willing them all out of the hallway and into the chamber where she had first met Yuzuha, with the ancient painted ceiling arching high over their heads.

“Well, I wondered how long you’d take to come here.”

The voice was low and even, and as Washu opened her eyes, she saw Yuzuha standing before them, alone in the chamber as she glanced in interest between Washu and her two companions. “And whether or not you’d bring friends. The Juraian Prince, I assume… he carries the sword of the Emperor as if he were born to wield it. Jurai’s Power failed to kill me once, you know. You might have come all this way to destroy me, but you won’t find it so easy on Rikishouki. The people here need me — they are helpless without my protection. I have shielded them from those they most fear — from you and your kind — and they will not turn so easily against their Priestess. Even

now, Tadashi and your traitor Priestess Tokimi are being hunted down by my soldiers and they are closing in. None of you will leave this planet alive — on that you have my word."

"Ryoko? Mayuka and the rest?" Washu sent Ryoko an anxious glance, and Ryoko shook her head.

"She's bluffing. Or at least, if she's not, her people are useless at playing hide and seek." She said categorically. "Ryo Ohki says they're quite alone… don't worry. If anything happens, I'll tell you right away."

Yuzuha's eyes narrowed as she glanced at Ryoko with new eyes.

"What are you, creature?" She asked softly. "How do you pretend to know such things, when you are here with me?"

"You'd like to know that, wouldn't you?" Ryoko flexed her fingers, light glittering from their tips as she glared at the demon defiantly. "Pity for you you'll never find out. You're not dealing with idiot Juraian soldiers this time, Yuzuha. You're not even dealing with the Emperor. You're dealing with us, and you have no idea what we're capable of. You should surrender now, and flee this planet — otherwise you might find yourself regretting it."

"Flee?" Yuzuha's eyes widened with disbelief, then she began to laugh, shaking her head in amusement as her body was cloaked in a reddish aura. Before them, her form shimmered and changed, reflecting the true demon form that Washu had known she possessed all along. "You think that I will flee so easily? What do I have to fear, exactly? More slashes from a Juraian lightsword? I have survived those before."

"The sword Prince Tenchi carries channels the will and spirit of the Goddess Tsunami, who would never condone the way you treat the people here." Washu said quietly. "You would do better not to mock him, Yuzuha. He is more powerful than you can see."

"And what of you, who claims to be a Priestess, even when you consort with the planet Jurai?" Yuzuha snapped. "You may have acquired the appearance of a Hakubi child, traveller, but the Hakubi are dead. The daughter of the last Priest was killed by wolves. So it says in the annals of this planet, recorded by those who first came here so many years ago. She was buried and destroyed a long time ago. You are not her, and you do not fool me as easily as you fool some of my people."

She grimaced.

“And as for Tokimi, she is a shadow of her former self.” She added. “Without Kihaku, such a Priestess holds no power. She is useless, quite mad, and certainly not worthy of anyone’s veneration. Did you really think it would be so easy as that to claim another colony in Jurai’s name, using a puppet Priestess and a web of lies?”

Washu’s brows knitted together angrily at this, blue light flaring from Mayuka’s mineral bracelets as she surveyed her opponent.

“I *am* blood of the Hakubi tribe.” She said softly. “I *am* daughter of the last Priest. I *am* Hakubi-no-Washuu. Whether you believe in me or not is immaterial. I am still here to do what my father would have wanted me to do, a long time ago. Free my people, protect them, and let them live once more in peace. I didn’t understand then the things I know now. Tokimi is not, and has never been the true Priestess of Kihaku. She took the crown because of my failure to act — my inability to see how much my World needed me to guide it. But I will not make that mistake twice. Tokimi has suffered enough. The Kii have suffered enough. I will not stand back and see them punished further for mistakes made in a lifetime before they were even born!”

Yuzuha’s eyes narrowed, and she shook her head, clasping her hands together as her body became bathed once more in angry reddish light.

“Not if I kill you.” She returned. “And I will take pleasure in doing just that.”

With that she sent a volley of dark magic in Washu’s direction, narrowly missing her target as the scientist hazed and blurred out of view, re-materialising several feet up as she prepared to take aim herself. Ryoko, sensing the battle had really begun, flared her own forcefield around her body, focusing her light energy into her familiar sabre as she prepared to launch into the fray. At her right hand, Tenchi had already raised his sword, poising himself ready to take the first chance he had to strike, but Washu held up her hands, deflecting a second wave of fire away from her as she darted ever upwards.

“No.” She said firmly. “Not yet. This is my fight, both of you. Just be ready… but please, don’t intervene unless you have no choice. Only my magic can take Yuzuha down, I’m sure of that — and when that time comes, I might need the both of you to help me. But if I can do this myself, I will. This is my fault, after all. I should be the one to remedy it, if I can.”

Ryoko opened her lips to protest, but she faltered, her eyes widening as her forcefield flickered and dissolved into shards of light.

“Ryo Ohki!” She whispered, stumbling as she struggled to retain her focus. “Washu! Ryo Ohki’s in trouble! She and the others… Yuzuha’s people…”

“Ryoko, are you all right?” Tenchi was alert in a moment, as Yuzuha took advantage of the pirate’s momentary lapse, casting a dark haze over her body and causing her to let out a yell. She stumbled to her knees, and Tenchi was at her side in an instant, wielding his sword angrily as he put himself between his fiancée and the demon.

“What did you do to her?” He demanded. “What did you do?”

“She was careless, and I thought I’d pick off the minnows before I tackled the main act.” Yuzuha looked amused, interpreting the look of anger that crossed Washu’s face at her words. “Darkness is my forte, traveller, or hadn’t you realised it yet? Her pain, your dismay… it all feeds me and makes me stronger. I enjoy the suffering of those around me — and she was foolish to drop her shield so quickly against me. Now my magic is over her, within her, eating away at her and pulling her downwards. I will kill her, soon. Slowly, so that it causes you all great pain. You can’t defeat me, traveller. Whoever you are, you can’t hope to overcome the dark strength this planet has to offer. The foolishness of one self-destructive Kii boy and the glittering of some ancient rock isn’t going to change what this world has become. In the last fifteen years I have made it my world… and you were fools to think you could challenge me here.”

“Tenchi, Ryo Ohki is…” Ryoko grasped at Tenchi’s arm, and he sent her an anxious look, reading the apprehension in her expression. “The witch has sapped my strength — Ryo Ohki’s fear distracted me, and I let my guard down. But she can’t hurt you so easily. Ryo Ohki… Washu’s friends… they are being brought here. I’ll be all right, but you have to help Washu defeat this creature. My magic is draining again — but she won’t kill me, so don’t let her convince you that she can. I’ve taken a lot of hits since you’ve known me, right? A lot of people have believed they can kill me — and none of them have succeeded.”

“Ryoko! Tenchi!” As Yuzuha aimed a blast of light in the direction of her companions, Washu reacted with a volley of her own, deflecting the worst of it against the chamber wall and searing a dark scar across the whiteish plaster. “Tenchi, can you get Ryoko out of here? Ryo Ohki needs your help — Mayuka and the others… please. Will you go to them? Ryoko, if you can teleport at all, I need you to…”

“I can’t.” Ryoko shook her head, gripping hold of Tenchi’s arm

more tightly as she met his gaze with an urgent one of her own. “But Tenchi, *you* can. We need to help Ryo Ohki somehow — and the others, else Washu will be distracted and Yuzuha will win!”

“Too late for that, you foolish creatures.” Yuzuha laughed, flexing her hand towards the chamber doors as the tall wooden panels swung open, revealing an armed guard, a struggling group of prisoners in tow. “I don’t know what your Ryo Ohki is, but whatever it is is irrelevant now. Tadashi and his traitor companions are my prisoners, traveller. Tokimi and those who aid her will soon be dead, you can take my word for that.”

She gestured, and the guardsmen surged forward, tossing Mayuka and her companions unceremoniously down onto the floor. From inside Mayuka’s cape, Ryo Ohki poked a cautious head out, uttering a faint, despondant mew as she surveyed her mistress’s weakened position. Mayuka reached out bound hands to grab her, but the cabbit was already gone across the chamber, leaping up onto Ryoko’s lap and licking her fingers as she rubbed up against her companion. Yuzuha glanced at her, pursing her lips as she took in the small creature’s appearance.

“Ryo Ohki, I presume?” She murmured. “How entertaining. I shall make space-meat of your pet, traveller — will that bring you pleasure, if I barbeque your animal familiar?”

“Ryo Ohki, no!” Ryoko rallied herself at this, projecting a faint forcefield around her companion as she did so, but Ryo Ohki was having none of it, and with a growl she flattened her ears, launching herself at Yuzuha with an angry yowl as she sank small, sharp teeth into the demon’s arm. Yuzuha slapped away at her, but Ryo Ohki was determined now, and her jaw clamped even harder down against the woman’s bone, her amber eyes glittering with determination as she clung on. Yuzuha muttered a curse of annoyance, red light blazing from her body as she repelled the brave young creature’s attacks and Ryo Ohki dropped to the floor with a yelp, struggling to her feet and shaking her fur thoroughly as she sought to regain her composure. Yuzuha laughed.

“So this is how it ends.” She said simply. “A chamber full of traitors. Men of my guard, watch closely. This is how your Priestess deals with enemies.”

She raised her arm in the direction of the trapped Mayuka and her companions, her fingers glowing with light and despite himself, Shouhei let out a whimper of fear, burying his head in his arms as he tried to hide from the terrible fate about to befall them all.

“Wait.” Washu had observed this all with a troubled expression, and now she moved forward, holding up her hands. Yuzuha eyed her curiously, lowering her hand as the scientist gently set down on the chamber floor, the blue light fading from around her body.

“Wait, Yuzuha.” She repeated. “I made a promise to my people, when I came here. It’s a promise I’m going to keep, no matter what the cost.”

“Why should I let that trouble me, traveller?” Yuzuha demanded. “You are no match for me. None of you are. Your people, as you call them, they revere me as their Priestess. What does it matter, what words you said to them? I have no interest in any assurances you might have given to gain their trust.”

“I promised them that no Kii blood would be shed.” Washu stood her ground, shaking her head slowly as she cast Mayuka a troubled glance. “And I meant it. Yuzuha, it’s not them that you want to kill. It isn’t they who have come here, interfered with your rules and caused you inconvenience. It isn’t even Tokimi — she’s as you say, a shell of her former self — no threat to anything you might choose to do.”

“And yet you believe you are, traveller?” Despite herself, Yuzuha’s eyes glittered with curiosity. Washu nodded her head.

“I believe so.” She agreed evenly. “And even if you won’t acknowledge my name, I think you know it too, deep down inside. You’re not a foolish woman. Tadashi and Shouhei have both told me so. You may take pleasure in their deaths, but such pleasure is impotent and short lived while your true enemy still haunts you.”

“You seek to propose terms then, Washu of the Hakubi?” There was derision in Yuzuha’s tone, and Washu inclined her head slightly, gesturing to the surrounding officers.

“These are your men and women. Sworn to you as Priestess of Rikishouki.” She said evenly. “You seek to hold their hearts, and yet, you also seek to kill some of their own in front of them. You create fear in their souls, but you will never truly hold Rikishouki unless you destroy the other claimants to the role of Miko. Mayuka is not your threat. She is a descendant of a Scribe, not a descendant of a Priest. *I* am the true heiress of the Hakubi Priest and I think that you know that. Your business is with me. Not with them.”

“Meaning what, exactly?” Yuzuha demanded. Washu shrugged.

“I seek to challenge you for the coronet of the Eagle.” She said evenly. “That’s all.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you will have to contend with me as an enemy for the rest of your existence, because I have already lived twenty thousand years without aging beyond this point.” Washu said, her eyes steely and cold as she spoke in matter-of-fact, calm tones. “I want to fight you now, Yuzuha, one on one, to see who truly is suited to be Priestess of Rikishouki. If you kill me, then your domination is assured. You will show your people, perhaps, what you want them to believe — that I am not the one I claim to be, after all.”

“And if you should defeat me?” Yuzuha raised an eyebrow. “I doubt you have the power to kill me, traveller woman. What do you expect to happen, should you manage to beat me? So long as I live, I will lay claim to Rikishouki. I do not believe in fair bargains. I take my chances — I do not deal in human honour.”

“If I kill you, you will have nothing to claim at all.” Washu said lightly.

“And if you do not? If the people here choose to honour me, even after your treacherous assault?”

“Then our battle will continue.” Washu said evenly. “But even if I do not kill you, Yuzuha, if I am able to defeat you, I ask you to release Mayuka, Tadashi and Shouhei from your grasp… and Tenchi, Ryoko and Ryo Ohki with them. Exile them from this world, if you like, but let them leave here alive. They will take my spacecraft, and fly from here. You will not be troubled by them again. These are the terms I will fight for. I will not see more Kii blood spilled if I can prevent it.”

“And you think I am such a fool as to accept a challenge from someone whose position is already so weak?” Yuzuha snorted. Washu offered her a slight, cold smile, something unreadable glittering in her green eyes.

“The question is whether you are such a coward as to refuse.” She said levelly. “Before your people, in your own castle… are you so afraid of the last Hakubi Priestess that you do not see a way to defeat me?”

Yuzuha’s eyes flickered with anger at this and she grimaced, flexing her fingers as her aura glowed once more with blood red energy.

“Very well, Hakubi-no-Washuu.” She said grimly. “So be it. I accept your challenge… and when I have killed you, I shall kill your followers just as surely. You are the fool, not I — and I will show these people once and for all why I am the true Priestess of the planet

Rikishouki!”

Chapter 13

Chapter Thirteen

So she was being overly cautious.

Kiyone paused at the edge of the forest, turning to glance behind them with a frown on her clever features. Washu had disappeared into the castle, she knew, and the demon Yuzuha was likely too occupied with defending herself against the scientist's strange ethereal magic to bother about chasing down two Galaxy Police Detectives. Their passage to the Unko was clear now, and the ship's key burned a hole in the palm of her hand as if anticipating their safe arrival. And yet still she hesitated, glancing up at the sky which, until a few minutes before, had been gleaming clear and blue.

"Rain." She murmured, eying the grey clouds in consternation as they massed menacingly overhead. "We should find shelter, and soon… if this place really is as tropical as all that, we shouldn't be waiting out here in the damp air."

"Then why have you stopped, Kiyone?" Mihoshi paused, casting her companion a confused look. "Seiryo's ship is this way, isn't it? We aren't lost, are we?"

"No, we're not lost. The Unko is just beyond these trees, over that rise in the distance." Kiyone gestured, chewing down on her lip as she contemplated what she was about to do. "I just… Tokimi seemed pretty shaken up and all in. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to let Seiryo manage her alone… they're taking longer than I thought to get here."

"But Seiryo wanted to be alone with Tokimi. Maybe they're talking." Mihoshi said off-handedly, her perception startling her companion with its uncharacteristic accuracy. "Still, he has his sword and I'm sure he's fine. Washu is taking care of that demon woman and so noone is going to bother about us. Come on, Kiyo. It's going to pelt it down in a moment or two. We shouldn't be hanging around here."

"I know." But still Kiyone hesitated, shaking her head at length in frustration. "It's no use. Miho, I'm going to look for them. Just in case that idiot nobleman has let his ego take over his good sense again, okay? You go back to the Unko — radio the Commander and let him know we're all right. Radio Jurai as well, if you can figure out how to

do that without breaking Seiryo's equipment. I won't be long — as soon as I see them, I'll come back. I just want to make sure — Tokimi isn't exactly the kind of person who can take care of herself."

"Are you sure?" Mihoshi's eyes widened with surprise as she held out her hand to take the Unko's ship key, glancing at it before slipping it around her wrist. "I mean, Seiryo did give this to you. And well, he did say to come back to the ship. Shouldn't we do as he says? He must know what he's doing, right?"

"That's exactly what worries me. That he thinks he does but he doesn't." Kiyone snorted. "Look, Mihoshi, how many times since we've got here has he almost done something stupid because of Tokimi? In fact, why is it that Tokimi got involved in all of this in the first place? There's no guaranteeing what kind of trouble he might have gotten them both in now — he's in the frame of mind where he'd draw his sword first and ask questions later, and that's not necessarily the most sensible course of action."

"You sound worried about him." Mihoshi looked bewildered. "So you really are friends with him, then? Even though you argue with him all the time?"

"Yes." Kiyone rubbed her temples. "It's hard to explain, Mihoshi. Impossible, actually. It makes no sense to me either. But I'll feel better when I know he and Tokimi are safely back aboard the Unko. I'm worried about her too — and Washu would want us to make sure her sister was safe."

"All right, then." Mihoshi nodded. "I'll go back to the ship and do as you say. You can count on me, Kiyone — just don't be too long, all right? It's really going to get wet out here soon, and you'll catch cold if you get soaked."

"I'll take my chances." Kiyone offered her friend a smile. "Thanks, Mihoshi. I owe you one."

"That's what partners are for." Mihoshi winked, then turned on her heel, skipping off towards the trees and out of sight. Kiyone watched her go, inwardly hoping her strange, happy-go-lucky friend would manage to open the Unko without blasting the craft into space. Then she sighed, turning back towards the main path and heading slowly across the landscape towards the settlement they had just left.

She reached the riverbank just as the heavens opened and, sending a rueful grimace upwards towards the dark, bleak skyline, she sought shelter beneath the wide leaves of a nearby tree, squinting through the driving wetness to where a sturdy wooden bridge connected the two

high-banked sides of the fast-flowing river. When she and Mihoshi had crossed it, it had swayed slightly under their weight and with the gentle tug of the wind, but the craftsmanship had been solid and even, and Kiyone had found herself inwardly gratified at the skill involved in its construction. It had, as Seiryo had earlier observed, obviously hung there for some time, connecting two wide regions to one another by means of rough-hewn tree bark and rope, and as she stood there, doing her best to avoid the drizzle running off the tree branches, she imagined that it had seen much worse tempests than this. As she glanced at the speed of the river, she realised that the bridge had been set so high on the bank for a reason — that this crossing point had been chosen to avoid the rush of the water below in a rainstorm such as this.

"It will be nice to get back somewhere where you're not at the whim of the elements, but at least the people here seem to have prepared for all eventualities." She muttered, as through the haze she thought she made out the figures of two people. Further squinting told her that one of them at least was her noble travel companion, and relief flickered in her heart as she registered that the other one must be Tokimi, wrapped as she was in Seiryo's own cape as they reached the water's edge. For a moment she debated calling out to them, but then decided against it, knowing that despite the stability of the bridge, the wood would still be slick from the rain and that crossing with a girl so close to full blown hysteria would take up most of Seiryo's attention.

Her promise to Mihoshi echoed in her mind, yet still she stayed there, waiting for them to cross, and inwardly feeling strange for wanting to do so. Clearly, after all, her friends were all right and were, as Seiryo had said, right behind them. But despite that, some sixth sense kept Kiyone rooted to the spot. Safe as the bridge was, it was still the most difficult obstacle between them and the ship. And should any of Yuzuha's residual soldiers choose now to launch an attack, Kiyone knew that Seiryo would be caught completely off guard. His arm looped securely in Tokimi's as he guided her onto the bridge, his attention was entirely on the matter at hand, and Kiyone brushed her hand against the butt of her blaster, inwardly comforted to feel it there.

"You go on ahead of me, Tokimi. I'll be right behind you." Now she could hear Seiryo's words, and she pressed closer to the trunk of the tree as she watched the young Kii tentatively step out into the middle of the bridge. Her manner of crossing was cautious yet methodical, and Kiyone realised with a jolt that it was not the action of a terrified child but rather of one who had weathered such storms before, and

knew exactly how to pace across the wood to reach safety. Inwardly she felt silly at underestimating Tokimi's strength — impaired she might have been, but such a climate was more familiar to her than it was to any of them, and she clearly did not need as much of Seiryo's help as any of them had expected.

Tokimi was almost across the bridge by the time Seiryo began his own crossing, moving far more gingerly than his companion as his expensive Juraian boots slipped more easily on the water-drenched wood planks. He gripped tightly to the rope railing, and despite herself, Kiyone hid a smile at the tentative nature of his progress. Somehow, she thought, he looked very much like a duck out of water, and she resisted the urge to burst out laughing.

"Though I wish I had a camera." She mused. "Because then the next time his ego ranges out of control, I'd have something with which to temper it."

Almost as soon as the thought had crossed her mind, however, the humour was gone from her face as she registered another shadow on the bridge behind her friend, hazy in the thick rain but clearly visible as the form of a human being. Fear now shot through Kiyone's heart and she darted forwards, her weapon in her hand as the stranger drew something from his belt, making a lunge in Seiryo's direction.

"Seiryo, look out!" She shrieked, and Seiryo swung around, seeing his would-be assailant for the first time as his hand went to the hilt of his own blade. As Kiyone ran to the river bank, reaching out a hand to take Tokimi's and pull the frightened girl behind her, she realised that this lone warrior was one of Yuzuha's retainers, his uniform dirty and his expression one of fixed rage as he charged across the bridge once more. This time Seiryo was ready for him, however, and the Kii blade met the Juraian one with a shower of sparks that quickly fizzled out in the drenching downpour. Seiryo muttered a curse as his feet almost slipped from under him, and Kiyone bit her lip, her hand tightening around her weapon as she debated whether or not to intervene.

"I don't want to hit the wrong person by mistake." She murmured.

"Kiyone-san?" Tokimi grabbed at her companion's arms, fear in her eyes as she surveyed the battle on the bridge. "Is Nii-chan all right? That man… that man is bad. He told me I would die. He was bad to me."

"He was, huh?" Kiyone pursed her lips. "He hurt you?"

Tokimi nodded.

“He’ll kill Nii-chan and Tokimi and Kiyone-san.” She whispered. “Because the demon lives inside of him… she told him to, and he doesn’t resist her.”

Kiyone turned her attention back to the bridge, as she saw the Juraian slip once more on the wet surface, dropping to his knees as he parried a shot from the Kii soldier’s blade. Indecision faded as she realised that the wet conditions were impairing Seiryo’s ability to fight, and she bit her lip, raising her weapon as she aimed it carefully at the angry Kii.

“Just to wing him. Nothing else.” She muttered, more to calm herself than to placate Tokimi, whose eyes had become huge at the sight of her weapon. “I’m not in this business to kill people, but I’m not going to stand back and let Seiryo get killed either. This is my job, and what I’m trained to do. Don’t worry, Tokimi. We’re not going to let him hurt Seiryo. Not if I can help it.”

She narrowed her eyes, focusing all her attention on her aim and, as her finger pressed down over the trigger, a single shot rang out across the landscape, piercing the hiss of the rain with a strange, eerie crackle as the bullet sped across the sky. Seiryo’s attacker stumbled back, as it met its mark, embedding itself into his right shoulder, and as his blade fell from his fingers, he cursed in his native tongue, reaching out a clumsy hand to grab Seiryo’s leg as he slipped towards the edge of the bridge. Seiryo slashed at him with his sword, but it was too late to right his own balance and as the Kii tumbled off the bridge and into the racing water below, Seiryo’s own position slipped precariously near to the edge. He sheathed his sword, struggling to get a better grip on the bridge’s structure.

“Nii-chan!” Tokimi shrieked, as his desperate grab for the rope missed, the momentum of his gesture sending him swinging into the wood of the bridge. There was a sickening crack as his head made contact with the edge of the wooden walkway, and Kiyone watched in horror as her friend plunged towards the racing water below, knocked completely out of his senses as he sank beneath the waves.

“*Seiryo*!” She exclaimed, taking a step forward, but even as she did so she realised that the racing, raging current was too swift and that even if she was to attempt diving beneath the surface, she would soon be swept away. At her right hand, however, Tokimi had no such reservations and she leapt forward, tossing Seiryo’s cape aside and diving cleanly from the edge of the bank before Kiyone could prevent her. The detective’s heart stilled in her chest as she saw the young girl’s cream robe disappear beneath the surface of the water which, in

places, was already tinted a faint red by the blood of the wounded Kii.

“Washu is gonna *kill* me.” She murmured, hurrying along the riverside as she struggled to see any sign of either the Juraian or his impetuous, heedless charge. To begin with she could see nothing but swirling waves, but as she crouched down at the water’s edge, she saw a flash of pastel fabric, followed by the glitter of something gold. Mindful of Tokimi’s tattered Juraian attire, Kiyone’s heart leapt in her throat as the Kii girl’s head broke the surface, her guardian’s limp body clutched tightly and resolutely in her arms as she struck out strongly for the shore. All around her, the rising water lapped and pulsed against her, as if trying to return her to the deep, but Tokimi’s strength was an equal match for anything the river could supply and as she drew closer and closer, Kiyone realised that she did not seem to be in any distress.

“Kiyo-neesan!” The girl’s voice broke through Kiyone’s dazed disbelief, and Kiyone jerked back to attention, holding out her hands to receive the still nobleman’s body as Tokimi grabbed hold of the slippery, stone-embedded ledge, supporting herself with one arm against the pull of the water as she helped to hoist her guardian from the swirling wet. Once sure that Seiryo was safely on shore, she gripped hold of the stone more firmly, hauling herself up onto the side with determination as she hastened to Seiryo’s side.

“Tokimi…” Kiyone was quick to follow suit. “You shouldn’t have done something so crazy… what would I have told Washu if you drowned?”

“Nii-chan isn’t breathing.” Tokimi paid no heed to her words, panic in her voice as she grabbed Kiyone tightly around the wrists. “Kiyo-neesan, please, help Nii-chan! Nii-chan can’t die. *Nii-chan can’t die*!”

Realising that the girl wasn’t far from fresh tears, Kiyone turned her attention to her friend’s silent body, realising with some dismay that Tokimi was right. Seiryo’s skin had a bluish tinge to it, and as she held her hand above his nose and mouth, she could not feel warm breath against her skin. She hesitated for a moment, then she nodded her head, reaching across Seiryo’s body to loosen his upper clothing.

“I’ll try and get him to breathe again, don’t worry.” She said softly. “I know CPR — and I’m trained to use it. Don’t panic, Tokimi. He’s not dead yet.”

“CPR? What is?” Tokimi did not look comforted, and Kiyone frowned, struggling to find the words to explain even as she unfastened the tight collar of Seiryo’s undershirt.

“It’s… it’s like breathing life into someone.” She said eventually. “Like… like giving them the kiss of life, if you like.”

“Kiss… of life?” Tokimi’s eyes widened, then, “Kiyo-neesan will kiss Nii-chan? And he will get better?”

“Not exactly, but hopefully the result will be the same.” Despite herself Kiyone pinkened, glad that she did not have to meet her companion’s gaze as she steeled herself for what she was about to do. Gently she pinched Seiryo’s nose, tilting his head back as she ascertained that he had only swallowed river water and no other debris. Finding all clear, she drew a deep breath to steady herself, then, very carefully, she lowered her lips to his, her heart jumping as she carried out the procedure she had been trained to do so long ago. She had used it before, more than once, but never on one who had become such a strange kind of friend, and inwardly she was glad that he would have no memory of the encounter, when he awoke.

Providing that he did awaken.

At this sobering thought, Kiyone pushed her distracting thoughts to the back of her mind, focusing her attention solely on the task at hand as she fought to restore Seiryo’s breathing. To begin with, it seemed a futile attempt, and then, just as she was preparing to give up, Seiryo’s body shuddered into life as he coughed, spitting up river water. Comforted by this sign of life, Kiyone registered the faint rise and fall of his chest, and she bit her lip, inwardly giddy with relief.

“He’s breathing again, Tokimi.” She said slowly. “I think he’ll be all right.”

Tokimi ran a finger over Seiryo’s soaked form, observing him carefully as colour returned to his cheeks. Then she nodded, flinging her arms around Kiyone and taking her off guard.

“Thank you for saving Nii-chan, Kiyo-neesan.” She whispered.

“Woah!” Kiyone fought to steady herself, taken off guard by the gesture. “It was as much you as it was me, if not more! I could never have swum like that, Tokimi — you were amazing.”

“Tokimi had to help Nii-chan, because Nii-chan always comes to help Tokimi.” Tokimi said simply, meeting Kiyone’s gaze with shining sapphire eyes. “Everything will be all right now, yes? Kiyo-neesan and Nii-chan are friends, Kiyo-neesan doesn’t hate Tokimi, we can go to the Unko and Washu will come so we can go home to Jurai?”

“Hopefully.” Kiyone pursed her lips, holding her companion at arm’s length. “Tokimi, what’s with this oneesan thing?”

Tokimi dimpled.

“Tokimi likes Kiyo-neesan.” She said simply. “So that’s why.”

Before Kiyone could respond, a crack of thunder rumbled overhead as lightning split the sky, and the detective frowned, mindful of where they were. Casting a glance towards the swelling water, she disentangled herself gently from Tokimi’s embrace, turning her attention back to the patient.

“We need to wake him up, if we can. He hit his head, so he might be concussed, but we can’t stay here and I doubt either of us can carry him.” She said quietly. “That man who came after you both might still be alive… I only caught his arm, I didn’t kill him. I’d rather we were back aboard the Unko before he got ashore, if that’s the case… if you could swim the current, there’s no way of knowing whether or not he’d be able to, too. Will you give me a hand, Tokimi? The sooner we get back there the better — and I want to make sure he’s not more badly hurt than a bad bruise to the Juraian ego.”

“Tokimi will help.” Tokimi agreed soberly. “Whatever Kiyo-neesan says, Tokimi will do. Tokimi will help Nii-chan get back to the spaceship… Tokimi wants to go home!”

For a moment nothing moved in the elaborately decorated Kii chamber, as Yuzuha and Washu met one another’s eyes head on, determination and anger flickering in both their gazes. Then, at length, Washu raised her hands, clenching her fists as the bracelets that encircled her wrists glittered and glowed with strange mystical blue light. From his position at Ryoko’s side, Tenchi had the impression once more that Washu was more than just an earthbound being, and as her ethereal aura increased, he was reminded of the way Tokimi had appeared to him on Kihaku, before she had been freed from the planet’s curse.

“Washu really is the Priestess of Kihaku, isn’t she? Even though Kihaku is gone?” Ryoko murmured, and Tenchi glanced at her, seeing the faint admiration in his fiancee’s golden gaze. He nodded his head.

“Yes.” He said softly.

“Do you think she can win?”

“She has to win.” Tenchi pursed his lips. “And we have to believe she can. No doubts, Ryoko. Remember what Washu said about negative energy? We have to believe that she can do this. We can’t give Yuzuha any advantages.”

“You’re right.” Ryoko nodded her head.

“Are you all right?”

“I think so. Drained, but it doesn’t hurt any more.” Ryoko assured him. “I think she’s more occupied with Washu right now — I’m not important enough for her to worry about, so don’t you worry either.”

Her gaze flickered across the chamber to where Mayuka and her two companions were still surrounded by Kii guards, their attention distracted completely by the brewing battle in the high-ceilinged chamber. “If I had enough energy, I’d take a gamble and try and get over there, teleport them out of here. I have a feeling it’s going to be a bit dangerous to stick around in here, and I’m not sure Washu’s friends can defend themselves in the way we can. She’s so determined not to kill anyone, Tenchi, and I’m with her on that. Do you think there’s any chance at all that you can raise Tsunami’s magic inside of you and shift them somewhere else?”

“I have absolutely no idea how.” Tenchi owned, looking rueful. “I know what you’re saying, Ryoko, but there’s a lot of my magic I don’t understand, and I can’t summon it at will.”

“Pity.” Ryoko pursed her lips. “I guess we’re just going to have to hope for the best.”

Across the chamber, Washu had launched herself up into the air once more, her entire body bathed with a mixture of the blue light of Kihaku and the amber energy of her own Hakubi magic, and she brought her hands together with a flare of light, glaring down at Yuzuha with contempt and indignation.

“You never came here to help the people.” She said softly. “You came because you’d been driven out of Jurai, and that’s the only reason. I don’t know what caused you to leave — or how you were chased into this sector of space. But that’s the truth of it. You were a frightened exile who ran from the overwhelming power of Tsunami’s goodness.”

“I’m not afraid of Tsunami.” Yuzuha’s eyes glittered angrily as she fired a blast of dark energy in her foe’s direction, and Tenchi drew breath sharply, relief flooding through him as Washu deflected it harmlessly away to add another scorching scar to the chamber wall. “Or of you. You can say what you like, but words won’t win this battle.”

“Perhaps not.” Washu’s eyes narrowed. “But your people, as you call them, deserve to know what you are. Do they know that their

pain and suffering makes you stronger? That you hurt and subjugate them to exist in this form, Yuzuha? Your strength is dependant on their misery — do they know that, or have you concealed it from them too?"

"And what about you?" Yuzuha snapped back. "Do you think the Hakubi tribe have ever brought the Kii happiness, traveller? If you are who you claim, then you admit to abandoning your planet and your people to the mercy of a mad Priestess — a cleanser, a destroyer, a slayer of men. You have more blood on your hands than I have on mine — don't you realise that their suffering was begun by you and your kind? I only came here and made the best of the situation. I did not *create* their fear of outsiders, even if I did feed off it. I did not create their painful memories, or their bloodsoaked history. You and your tribe, you did that. Especially you, Hakubi-no-Washuu. You abandoned your World at the one time it needed your guidance. Who is really to blame for the way Rikishouki is, after all?"

Washu flinched at her words, and Tenchi bit his lip, his grip tightening automatically around the hilt of his sword as he did so.

"Washu, don't let her bait you!" He exclaimed. "You know that's what she wants — she wants to make you hurt!"

Washu's expression underwent a transformation, resolution burning anew in her green eyes as she nodded her head, redoubling the aura of magic that surrounded her as she focused a quick volley of blasts in the direction of the demon's form.

"I am not that weak." She said coldly. "My past is just that, Yuzuha. My past. Their past. Long over and forgotten. A planet that always lives in the past cannot possibly move forward. How can someone ever be free so long as they are shackled by the memories of things that have gone before? You've ruled over these people by playing on their fears of their past. It's time they stopped looking back. It's time they started to look forward."

"And you, the so called feather of the Eagle — you are the one to show them this future?" Yuzuha's tones were rich with derision. "You are just another fool. Your Kihaku is destroyed. The magic you draw on is tainted and damaged beyond all recognition. Even you must know that the legacy of the Kii Priestesses is long since over."

"Maybe it's just beginning." Washu said darkly, her hands flaring with new light. "You can taunt all you like, but I'm very good at concealing and controlling my emotions. And nothing you can say, Yuzuha, will deflect me from my cause."

Yuzuha eyed her opponant for a moment, then she laughed, shaking her head in amusement.

“Do you want to know why I am here, Hakubi-no-Washuu?” She asked softly, her tones mocking and derisive. “Why of all the planets I could have come to, it was Rikishouki? Do you understand why I was drawn here, to this planet which repels visitors as a matter of course?”

Washu stared at her for a moment, then frowned, shaking her head.

“I don’t care.” She said darkly. “I only care about getting rid of you. That’s all.”

“Many thousands of years ago, a planet’s life force became tainted and a Priestess turned to madness.” Yuzuha said frankly, red embers glowing from her fingers as she spoke. “In the despair and desperation of the planet’s dying people, a new energy was formed. A bleak darkness, strong enough to knit together and take physical form. The hate and anger of your people, Hakubi-no-Washuu, when you chose to abandon them for the science of Jurai. That entity was me… Yuzuha, the demon of darkness. I was forged by the black hearts of your own people — by the suffering inflicted by Tokimi-sama as she failed to control the Eagle’s will. I was hunted by Juraians, but the Juraians could not defeat me, because the pain they caused Kihaku helped me to live and grow in strength and fortitude. I came here because these are my people too, traveller. Their ancestors forged my spirit with their hopeless, empty hearts.”

She smiled, as disbelief flooded Washu’s features.

“You find it hard to absorb, I can see that.” She whispered. “But now you understand why I will not walk away from Rikishouki. My enemy is Jurai, because the Kii hate towards Jurai helped to give me existance. Over the course of time, I have become much more than just another demon forged by human greed. I have absorbed knowledge and become whole — a being who exists and follows her own desires. I will not let go of this planet just because you think to challenge me. Kii resentment stirs within me — the resentment against those who abandoned the World, and those who burnt it beyond recognition. That is why I will kill both you and Tokimi, before this day is out. This is the will of the Kii people, Hakubi-no-Washuu. This is the legacy of Kihaku. This is the true action of the World. To punish those who abandoned it so long ago.”

Despite herself, Washu faltered, the blue energy fading from around her body as she absorbed her opponant’s words. Tenchi’s heart clenched in his chest as he registered the confusion and dismay in the

scientist's green eyes, and he glanced at Yuzuha, realising that she was enjoying her companion's discomfort.

"Washu!" He exclaimed. "She's making it up — don't let her fool you with her lies!"

"If this creature truly is a Hakubi, Prince of Jurai, she knows that I speak the truth, for she can see my true self and she would sense my deceit." Yuzuha said quietly. "There is no sense in further fighting. I shall kill you now, Washu of the Hakubi. Rikishouki belongs to me, and it always will. You have no claim here. You and your false blooded sister — you will all die."

With this a blaze of energy encircled her body, flaring out to fill the chamber as it rushed across towards Washu, engulfing her in a cloud of eerie red light.

"Washu-sama!" Mayuka let out a shriek of dismay as the scientist disappeared into the glow, and Tenchi was on his feet, anxiety and fear in his own expression as he searched in vain for any sign of his friend within the odd dark magic. For a moment it seemed hopeless, and he could see nothing, but then, from somewhere within the crimson light he saw a faint flicker of blue stirring in its depths. Slowly but surely, spectral tongues of azure flame began to lick away at Yuzuha's energy, growing and becoming more substantial as within the centre of the demon's magic, a form became visible. Tenchi let out a gasp of surprise as he registered Washu's form, her body glimmering with energy and ghostly light as the sapphire fire lapped around her, devouring Yuzuha's bleak energy with its determined, voracious glow. Washu's eyes glittered with a strange light, her thick red hair flowing out around her body as if caught up in an imaginary breeze, and across the chamber, Tenchi was aware of a ripple of uncertainty flowing around the Kii guards who still kept Mayuka and the others trapped. A few of them dropped to their knees, some pushing hands together in prayer, and Tenchi almost felt like following suit. For the first time since he had met the cheeky, mischievous scientist, he saw her as something other than a pragmatist — and, as the flicker of blue feathered wings spread out around her body in a distinct, if transparent shadow, he recognised the true power that had lain dormant within his friend for so many generations.

"She really *is* the Priestess of Kihaku." Ryoko murmured, and as he glanced at his fiancee, Tenchi could tell that she was as blown away as he was. "Dammit, Tenchi, my mother's some kind of Goddess under that stupid scientific uniform!"

"Perhaps you were created by the hatred of the Kii people, or their

pain, or their suffering." Washu spoke now, her voice echoing eerily around the chamber as every eye turned to her, transfixed by the being that stood before them. Across the room, the Kii soldiers were also listening with rapt attention, and Tenchi realised with a jolt that Washu's magic had transcended any language barrier — speaking directly into the hearts and minds of those around her and making herself understood to all in the same way Tokimi had done so many months before. "But that ends here and now. You're wrong if you think that the people of this planet have given up hope. I've seen the paintings beneath ground. The images of my father, the last Priest, and the hopes of the people who believed that one day the last Hakubi would come and set them free from their misfortune. It's taken a long time, Yuzuha. A very long time. But I'm here and I mean to do as I'm supposed to do. I didn't know why I was called to this planet, or what it was that made me land. Now I do. It was the spirit of Kihaku, calling me home. And I am not going to run away from this fight. You can say what you like. There are enough people who believe in the Eagle's salvation to render you ineffective. Kihaku's magic is more than just confined to the rock around my wrist. People's faith keeps it alive. The belief in the Eagle and the World still exists, beneath the doubt you've cast over everyone. And I am the Eagle's representative. Just as my father tried to do, it is my duty to rid the world of evil spirits. And I intend to do that… right now."

Before Yuzuha could react, she had drawn her hands together, the ghostly wings that surrounded her following her gesture and as tips of the feathers made contact, a bright blueish haze spread out across the chamber, casting an eerie glow on the images painted on the ceiling as it forged its way into every dark nook and cranny. To Tenchi, the images painted so long ago almost seemed to come to life in the gleam of Washu's divine magic, and despite herself, Yuzuha took a step back, uncertainty on her face for the first time since the battle had begun. Washu's eyes narrowed, as her aura intensified, and she held out her hands, speaking in clear, resolute tones as she repeated the words of exorcism she had first used so long ago to confine Yugi Kuroda. As Tenchi watched, spellbound, Yuzuha was encircled in light, letting out a shriek of pain and rage as it grew ever brighter around her. Washu did not falter, clenching her fingers tightly together as she completed her spell, and a final wave of blue energy pulsed out from around her, filling the chamber once more with it's eerie glow. With a final scream of defeat, Yuzuha's form shattered and dispersed into shards of black ash, scattering across the floor like ebony rain.

For a moment, Washu just stood there, wings unfurled as she gazed at the place where her rival had stood. Then she sighed, the magic

flickering and disappearing from around her body and she crumpled to her knees, colour draining from her face as she struggled to keep herself conscious.

“Washu!” Tenchi hurried forward to support her, and she raised her gaze to his, offering him a faint smile.

“Well.” She said flippantly, her tones feeble but playful enough to reassure the prince that his friend would be all right. “So I guess that’s that.”

“Miko-sama?”

In the silence that followed, one of Yuzuha’s guardsmen stumbled forward, dropping to his knees as he prostrated himself before the scientist. He spoke a few words in the thick, gutteral Kii dialect, and at his speech, Washu seemed to smile, reaching out a hand to pat him on the shoulder. Holding out her other to Tenchi, who helped her to her feet, she turned to face the gathered Kii, reading the confusion and awe on their faces. Her smile widened, and as she spoke to them in the same strange tongue, Tenchi noticed the expressions go from fear to relief and hope.

“What did you say?” He asked softly.

“Nothing much.” Washu said simply. “He was worried that I’d see them as traitors and want to punish them for disloyalty to the true Priest’s tribe. I just assured them all that I’m in no position to punish anyone.”

She winced, rubbing her aching body.

“I don’t really want to do that again any time soon.” She added. “No wonder my Father was always so serious about it. Even with just a tiny bit of Kihaku’s power, I feel like I’ve been mangled.”

“You were amazing, Washu.” Ryoko joined them at that moment, and Tenchi was secretly glad to see the colour returning to his fiancee’s cheeks. “I guess now I really know why it is I was such a kickass pirate. I never thought much about the Kii in me, but I’m starting to think it’s not such a bad thing to have.”

“Well, as your mother I suppose I have to set you the example.” Washu said flippantly.

“What happens now?” Tenchi asked. “Washu, I don’t speak Kii, but it seems pretty clear to me that these people think you’re their new saviour. They’re staring at you as if you were sent from Heaven to free them — what will you do? I mean, we came here to rescue you, but…

in the end…”

“In the end you don’t need to be rescued.” Ryoko said pensively. “You were leading a rebellion and… and I guess, digging up bits of your past. Are you going to stay here now? Or…?”

Washu paused for a moment, her gaze flitting to the waiting Kii. Slowly she shook her head.

“I don’t belong here, whatever my bloodline says.” She said frankly. “I’m too tainted by the world outside. And besides, you came all this way to get me. It would be rude to refuse the lift back, wouldn’t it?”

“They’ll be disappointed.” Ryoko remarked, though Tenchi could tell that his fiancee was relieved. “They’d probably make you their God, you do realise that?”

“I’m a scientist, Ryoko, and my place is in my lab, not leading a planet whose ideas are far more spiritual than I am.” Washu said quietly. “And besides, if I stayed here, well, I’d lose my family again, wouldn’t I? It took me long enough to find it… I’m not ready to turn my back on it just yet. If you’ve no objections, I want to come to the Earth with you both. Just give me a minute or two to speak to Mayuka and the others, all right? It’s her World now — but I want to make sure the people here understand what Yuzuha was, and why things have been so bad. If she was truly created in the way she claimed, then they must be vigilant against such negativity again from now on. It’s the one thing I should do, before I leave — ensure my people are all right.”

“Then we’ll wait for you outside.” Tenchi said wisely. “And let you speak to Mayuka and the others alone. They’ll be sad to lose you, Washu — but I’m glad you’re coming home with us. It wouldn’t be the same on the Earth without you, you know — and it would be sucky if you missed Ryoko and my wedding.”

“I wouldn’t miss that for the world. I’m counting on an entertaining spectacle.” Washu’s eyes twinkled faintly, and she nodded her head. “All right. Thank you, Tenchi. I won’t be long, I promise. Just long enough to make Rikishouki understand that the future is for them to create… the past shouldn’t hold them back any longer.”

She shrugged, looking self-conscious.

“Maybe the Eagle is still protecting them.” She added. “Who knows? At the very least, its something to hold on to. And passing demons won’t be quite so able to take control in the future — of that I’m sure. At the very least, I’ve given them something they can believe

in again… and at the end of the day, I'm sure that my Father would be satisfied knowing that. At long last I've done what he hoped I'd do, and accepted my heritage. But I'm not a Hakubi in the way he was… this is as close as I'll ever get to fulfilling his wishes for me."

"I think he'd understand." Tenchi said quietly. "You can't always live the life someone else picks out for you, after all."

"No, you can't." Washu agreed. "And in some ways, that's the most important lesson of all!"

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

"Seiryo?"

From somewhere in the dark murkiness of his mind, Seiryo was aware of a voice calling his name and he struggled to reach it, fighting against the impulse to sink back down into oblivion.

"Nii-chan, wake up! Wake up please!"

That was Tokimi, and the panic in her voice jolted through Seiryo's senses, helping him to find the strength to return to reality. He opened his eyes, blinking a few times as the world span and swayed around him, and as he did so, he heard an exclamation and felt someone's fingers tighten around his own.

"Nii-chan!" As he brought the world into focus, he was aware of Tokimi's face looming over him, delight in her pretty sapphire eyes as she realised he was awake. "Nii-chan, you're all right! You're all right!"

"Barely, but yes. I think so." Seiryo spoke blurrily, raising a hand to his head as he struggled to sit up, and someone on his other side grabbed hold of his shoulders, hauling him into a more upright position. His throat, he noticed, felt raw and dry, and he coughed, surprised by how much strength the action sapped out of him.

"Take it slowly." That first voice was there again and he turned his head, surprise glittering in his eyes as he recognised the speaker.

"Kiyone."

"Yeah." Kiyone nodded her head. "Who else did you expect?"

"Where are we?" Seiryo's senses were fast returning to him, and Kiyone snorted, shaking her head slowly.

"Still on that reprobate planet." She said frankly. "Sit still for a moment, will you? You frightened Tokimi, and you're still white as a sheet."

"What happened?" Seiryo stopped in his attempts to get up, meeting her gaze with a quizzical one of his own.

"Nii-chan fell in the water." Tokimi was the one who answered, her

tones soft as she recounted the episode. “Came to help Tokimi, but evil man came and Nii-chan fell.”

“I… fell?”

“You freed Tokimi from her bonds, but coming back across the bridge you were ambushed by one of Yuzuha’s men and in throwing him off you misplaced your footing.” Kiyone explained quietly. “Your stupid, expensive boots almost cost you your life, you idiot — slipping and sliding on the wet wood like that. In any case, you fell off the bridge and it was too slick from the rain for you to right yourself again. You hit your head as you fell — Tokimi and I both saw you do it, and you’ve a bump to prove it, somewhere in all that hair of yours. You should be thanking Tokimi, Seiryo. She jumped right in after you.”

“*Tokimi* did?” Seiryo blinked, disbelief flooding his expression as he eyed his charge in wonder. “*You* pulled me out of the river?”

Tokimi nodded, a faint glow of pride touching her expression.

“Tokimi wanted to help Nii-chan.” She said seriously. “Nii-chan was sinking, not swimming. So Tokimi helped.”

“I didn’t even know you *could* swim.” Seiryo admitted. “Was that something your father taught you?”

“Tokimi used to swim a lot.” Tokimi agreed. “On Kihaku.”

“She certainly was strong. She fought against the racing tide and brought you to the shore — I couldn’t have done it, but she got there all right.” Kiyone added. “She was very determined, Seiryo. She didn’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I see.” A faint smile touched Seiryo’s lips, and he squeezed his ward’s hand gently. “Thank you then, Tokimi. I’m indebted to you for my life.”

“Not just me.” Tokimi pinkened, shaking her head. “Kiyo-neesan helped.”

“Kiyo… neesan?” Seiryo stared, and Kiyone grimaced, uttering a sigh.

“Tokimi, about this neesan thing.” She began, but Tokimi grinned, grasping her by the hands and offering her a winning, disarming smile.

“Kiyo-neesan helped Nii-chan too, you know.” She continued, oblivious to her companion’s discomfort. “She kissed you and you

came back to life."

"She… did… *what*?" Seiryo's eyes almost popped out of his head, and Kiyone's face flushed with colour, embarrassment in her expression.

"I did no such thing!" She objected hotly. "Tokimi, I didn't kiss him. You know I didn't!"

"You said it to me." Tokimi looked confused. "You said you were going to give him a… a life kiss. That's what you said."

"Kiss of life, Tokimi." Kiyone sighed heavily. "Not a proper kiss. Seiryo stopped breathing. It was first aid, that's all."

"Yes." Tokimi beamed happily. "That's what Kiyone did, Nii-chan. She life kissed you and you breathed again. And then you spat out all this water and Kiyo-neesan said you'd be fine. And you are. Aren't you?"

"I… I suppose I am, if a little shaken." Seiryo admitted, casting Kiyone a sidelong glance as he did so. "I see. So it was really a team effort. I'm fortunate, then, to have two such guardian angels to protect me."

"Well, if you weren't such an idiot, you wouldn't need protecting." Kiyone muttered, her cheeks still uncomfortably red. "And if Tokimi hadn't been such a good swimmer, Seiryo, you'd have been a goner for sure. It's really her that saved you. Not me."

"I'm grateful to both of you." Seiryo said simply. "And now, if you don't mind, I'd like to get up. I'm cold and my clothing is wet — so is Tokimi's, and there's a chill wind blowing through here. We should try to find the others and get back to the Unko. Is Mihoshi-san safe? Or…?"

"I sent her back to your ship when I came to see what was taking you so long." Kiyone said simply. "She should still be there. I told her it was important she stayed, so someone could radio out and let people know what was going on. So she gave me her word that she would."

"It is cold." Tokimi shivered at that moment. "I would like to go to Unko, Nii-chan. Tokimi is cold here."

"Good call." Kiyone said with a grin. "I don't think we're far from it, all told."

"What of Washu and the rest?"

“I think Washu has things in hand.” Kiyone assured him. “Hopefully, at least — between the three of them, she, Tenchi and Ryoko must be able to do something against that demon woman, surely? They’re all pretty strong. I’m sure they’ll be all right — that they’ll deal with whatever they have to face inside that castle and we’d do better going back to the Unko and meeting them there… Washu would be mad if we started interfering and put Tokimi in more danger, after all.”

She shrugged.

“Come on, the both of you. If you can walk, Seiryo, its time to prove it — lets go back to the ship and get you two dried off.”

“Well, here we are.”

As Ryoko flickered and blurred her companions aboard the Unko’s cargo bay, Washu opened her eyes, putting a hand to her head as she struggled to steady the spinning walls. “Though you could be a bit more gentle on your landings, musume-chan. You’re quite disorientating.”

“Call it revenge.” Ryoko said unrepentantly, folding her arms across her chest. “Besides, my magic was more or less wiped out by Yuzuha as well, you know — it’s not functioning on all cylinders. You used your own strength up taking her out, and it’s best not to ask Tenchi to try transporting anything unless you want a random landing location. Quit complaining — be happy I managed to dig up enough energy to bring us back here in one shot!”

“I won’t pretend I’m not glad to see the inside of a spaceship again.” Washu admitted, putting her hand absently against the steel of the Unko’s bay with a smile. “I seem to have been away from my lab for a long time, and I’m starting to realise how much I’ve missed it.”

“Well, if Seiryo and the others brought Tokimi back here, we ought to go tell them that we’re ready to leave.” Tenchi remarked. “It’s been an interesting trip, all in all, but in honesty, I’m not sure it’s somewhere I want to spend too much more of my time. I actually began to feel guilty for the things Jurai did to Kihaku, when we were down in that chamber. As if it were my fault too, somehow, because of my ancestry.”

“That should go for me too, but it doesn’t.” Ryoko said pragmatically, reaching up to stroke the fur of the small cabbit that clung loyally to her shoulder. “Way I see it, things were a lot more brutal back then. It was kill or be killed, in many respects. I don’t

think the culture on Kihaku was any more special or innocent than the one on Jurai. It's just a case of people doing what people do. Grabbing as much loot as they can. It's the rule of the strongest taking control, that's all. It's how the universe works."

"Spoken like a true space pirate." Washu's eyes glittered with faint amusement, offering her daughter a smile. "But you have both sides of this conflict inside of you, Ryoko-chan. Your people were the persecutors and the persecuted — so you can afford to be magnanimous in your assessment. For the people of Rikishouki, it's never been so clear-cut."

She became grave.

"Besides, long ago as it was, a good many people did suffer from Jurai's invasion." She added softly. "What happened next is unpleasant, true enough, and driven by the core of Kihaku's own spirit magic. But the invasion was the first step in the destruction of my planet and my kind. In that respect, I can't be quite so dismissive. I remember the things you don't… you're lucky."

"But they will be all right now? Mayuka and her people?" Tenchi eyed her quizzically, and Washu nodded her head.

"I think so." She agreed. "I explained to them as best I could about Yuzuha's creation and that their planet needed to not live in fear of further invasion or pain. Things do happen, after all — bad and good. But you can't live your whole lives guarding against the bad times. If you do that, you might miss the good ones, and wind up in a much bleaker position for it. That's the message I tried to leave behind me — that enemies aren't defined by the planet from which they come, but by their actions. And that all they can do is live their lives and hope that all will be well."

"Well, if they get into trouble again, they'll have you to call on to go rescue them, I'm sure." Ryoko said cryptically, and Washu looked startled, staring at her daughter in confusion.

"Pardon me?"

"I assume that is the reason why you still have one of those stone things round your wrist?" Ryoko gestured. "Even if you're not planning on any spooky magic any time soon, Mayuka left you with that, didn't she? So that you'd know if Rikishouki ever needed the Eagle's salvation over again."

Washu pursed her lips, eying the pirate ruefully as she nodded, sliding the bracelet off her wrist.

“Sometimes I really forget that you’re my daughter, and other times, like this, you surprise me with your perception.” She admitted. “Yes, that was Mayuka’s hope. I don’t know whether or not it will be borne out — but I couldn’t resist the opportunity to take back with me some of the meteor samples and really learn for the first time about the nature of my planet’s core. Hopefully though Rikishouki won’t need my interference again. It was all very well, giving in to my bloodline and letting myself really become the Priestess of Kihaku once… but it’s not something I’d like to make a habit of. The emotion and energy that rushes up inside of you — I can quite easily see why it overwhelmed my sister and drove her to madness. It was all I could do to keep things in check and not rail out of control, when she said the things she did. It’s scary magic, Ryoko… intense and wild. It runs completely contrary to the kind of person I am — so I think, if I have a say in it, I won’t be going back.”

“Maybe.” Ryoko eyed her speculatively. “Well, come on. Let’s go upstairs and make ourselves known to the others, huh? I’m tired and hungry and that’s not a good combination.”

“We’re right with you.” Tenchi nodded, offering her a grin as they made their way up the narrow steps towards the bridge and drive room of the ship. “The sooner we get back to the Earth, the sooner things return to normal. As it is, I’ve probably missed two or three days of classes… how I’m going to explain to my professors that I was rescuing my future mother in law from a savage planet in the midst of space is anyone’s guess.”

“It would be an original excuse for absence.” Washu said with a chuckle. “And really, I am happy you came for me — both of you. I appreciate that you did.”

“Ryoko!” Mihoshi’s voice greeted them at that time. “Washu! Tenchi? But… why are you back here? Where’s Kiyone?”

“We said we’d come back once we’d dealt with that demon, and we have.” Ryoko said simply. “But what do you mean, where’s Kiyone?”

“Seiryo and Tokimi aren’t here either.” Washu’s humour died as she realised her sister was nowhere in evidence. “Mihoshi, what happened? You left the encampment together — didn’t you?”

“We did, but Kiyone made me come back to the ship alone.” Mihoshi’s eyes widened in alarm and fright. “Seiryo wanted to be alone with Tokimi, I think he wanted to talk to her about something. So he was behind us anyway. But Kiyone was worried they weren’t around, and so she went back to make sure they were okay. She

wanted me to radio Jurai and Headquarters but I got so confused and I didn't know which buttons to press to do which so I… I've just been waiting and… and I don't understand what's happened to them!"

"Damn Seiryo." Washu gritted her teeth. "And damn my exhausted magic! What is he playing at? If he's put my sister in any more danger…"

"Do you think they're in trouble?" Tears glittered on Mihoshi's lashes, and Washu sighed.

"I have no idea." She admitted wearily. "But one thing is for sure. We can't leave Rikishouki without them."

"We could go looking for them." Tenchi suggested. "You might be exhausted, Washu, and you can always stay here. But I'm fine, and Ryoko's not as blitzed as she was the first time Yuzuha blasted her magic. We could go and see if we could find them, and…"

"And then we'd have more people wandering aimlessly around a planet with no navigation capabilities." Washu sighed, shaking her head. "No, that's no good, Tenchi. Besides, it's driving down with rain out there now. I know this kind of storm. It would be too easy to lose someone, and then it would be even worse."

"But if they're in trouble…" Tenchi frowned. "What if Yuzuha sent guards after them? And what if those guards don't know their mistress has been taken out yet? We don't know what they might have encountered."

"If Kiyone gets killed I'll never forgive myself!" Mihoshi exclaimed, hurrying towards the door of the drive room as if preparing to head out into the storm herself, but Ryoko was too quick for her, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her back.

"You heard Washu. It's raining cabbits and dogs out there, and of all people, you are ten times more likely than any of us to get lost." She said frankly. "If anyone's going to go looking, it should be me. I know the ship's coordinates, and I can always teleport back here. I feel less drained every moment, and I'm sure I could manage it, if it were just me to consider."

"Hang on a minute, Ryoko." Tenchi held up his hands, and Ryo Ohki yowled, leaping down from the pirate's shoulder onto the dashboard of the Unko as the display glittered with light. "Something's going on. ..someone's outside. Does anyone have any idea how to bring up a visual on this thing? I don't want to accidentally blast off into space by pressing the wrong thing."

Ryo Ohki flicked her ears at him, pawing neatly between switches as she nudged her nose against one of the levers. Immediately the screen over their heads flickered into life, and Mihoshi let out an exclamation of relief.

“Kiyone! And Seiryo and Tokimi too!” She cried, joy in her blue eyes. “Oh, they’re okay! They’re okay! Quickly, someone, let them in!”

“I assume you have the ship’s key, if you came back here alone.” Washu pointed out. Mihoshi stared, then light dawned in her blue eyes and she nodded, fumbling around her wrist and producing the device, holding it out.

“I don’t know what to press.” She said earnestly. “But I know you will, Washu. And it looks so horrible and wet out there… we should let them come in quickly so they can have a hot bath and warm up. We don’t want them catching their death from a chill!”

Washu took the small ship key, activating it, and with a buzz of ship’s power, the three bedraggled strays re-materialised in the middle of the drive room, dripping wet as the light around them shimmered and faded.

“Well, all present and correct.” Ryoko said with a sigh. “Can we go home now? Please?”

“Kiyone, are you all right?” Heedless of her friend’s wet clothing, Mihoshi flung herself on her partner, hugging her tightly. “I was so worried!”

“We’re all fine.” Kiyone said with a nod, disentangling herself and offering the blond girl a grin. “Just fine. And I agree with Ryoko. It’s time we all of us went back home. This planet has definitely started to pall on me now — tropical and pretty it might be, but it’s not the kind of place I’d choose to visit again.”

“Seconded and carried.” Seiryo said dryly, rubbing his temples. “Give me a moment and I’ll set some coordinates — take us up out of the atmosphere. I assume that we’re going to the Earth first and foremost — Washu, that is where you want to go, isn’t it?”

“Yes, eventually.” Washu agreed. “But I’d like to see my sister safely back home first… if that’s all right with you.”

Seiryo frowned, meeting his friend’s gaze, but he nodded.

“Speaking of Tokimi, it’s not good for her to be in such wet clothes.” He said quietly. “She needs a hot bath and a change of clothes.”

“I’m not much better.” Kiyone glanced down at her rain and mud spattered uniform with a sigh. “Tokimi, how about we go, clean up and get dried off, huh? You must be even more uncomfortable than I am, in all those heavy robes.”

“Tokimi is wet.” Tokimi agreed. “But Nii-chan… Nii-chan is wet too.”

“As soon as I’ve plotted a course out of Rikishouki’s atmosphere, I’ll follow suit.” Seiryo promised. “But right now, the most important thing is getting the Unko as far away from this wretched planet as I can manage!”

Chapter 15

Chapter Fifteen

"Well, that's an adventure I never thought I'd have to experience."

Washu turned away from the ship's window, casting her companions a thoughtful glance as she did so. "I never imagined my past would catch up with me one day — it was a strange sensation, being Kii again. Even speaking the language again — as though my planet had never died at all."

"It must have been nice, in some respects." Kiyone reflected, taking a sip of hot tea as she settled herself down in an empty seat. "And it's over now. From what Ryoko was saying, Washu, you were quite the heroine… doesn't it feel good to know you saved them all from that demon woman Yuzuha?"

"Yes, and no." Washu frowned. "But it's over now, at least. And I can go home… once I've seen my sister safely back to Jurai, that is. It might mean an extra trip, but I want to be sure she gets there safely… since it seems I can't rely on her supposed guardian to do the job for me."

Seiryo glanced up at this, a stricken look in his teal eyes, and Washu narrowed her gaze, nodding her head.

"Yes, I do mean you." She said softly. "You're lucky that Tokimi is quicker to forgive than I am, you know. She seems to still want to stick with you, so I'm not going to try and take her back to the Earth or anything like that. But I'm not happy that she was put in danger, Seiryo. It was bad judgement and it almost got her killed."

"I know." Seiryo admitted, casting a glance down to where his exhausted charge was sprawled against him, her arms clinging securely to her body as she slept. "And I'm not offering any excuses, Washu. I am sorry. I saw only the fact that she might be able to interpret the Kii letters… but I had no idea it would have such an impact on her as it has. That she's been so afraid and so hurt, I take full responsibility for. And… and also the fact that she has begun to remember things we sought to conceal from her, too. It was irresponsible of me, and you have every right to shout."

Washu sighed, shaking her head.

“I’m too exhausted to really raise my voice, and besides, if I do, I’ll disturb her.” She said wearily. “But so long as you understand. Tokimi isn’t quite like anyone else… in a lot of ways. I don’t know what Yuzuha said or did to her, but whatever it was, I’m sure it wasn’t pleasant. And like you’d do anything you can to protect Suki, I feel similarly about Tokimi… I don’t like finding out she’s in trouble when I think she’s safe half a universe away.”

“I would give my life to protect Tokimi too, Washu.” Seiryo said evenly. “She is like my sister too, now. And you cannot possibly make me feel more guilty with such strictures, so I would advise you to save your breath. I know what you want to say… I have already reproached myself on this score far more than you can ever do.”

“Well, Tokimi has forgiven you.” Washu reflected. “So I suppose I’ll have to, as well. Like I said, you’re lucky.”

“Tokimi is a lot stronger than people realise she is, if you ask me.” Kiyone said reflectively. “She impressed me, out in the rain. I don’t think she’s helpless, Washu. And I don’t think that Seiryo was wrong to bring her to Rikishouki. Yes, unforseen things happened… but at the end of the day, there were things Tokimi understood — things she did — that helped us. And she wanted to rescue you, too. That should count for something, shouldn’t it?”

“I suppose so.” Washu nodded. “But even so, Kiyone — it’s so hard to know how much things register in her mind these days. I just don’t want to see her hurt again. That’s all.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that.” Kiyone shrugged. “I think she’ll be just fine.”

“Even so, I think she’ll be glad that you chose to come with us back to Jurai, rather than go straight to the Earth with Tenchi and Ryoko when they set off in Ryo Ohki this morning.” Seiryo reflected. “With the urgency you showed to leave Rikishouki, and with Lord Tenchi’s Earth classes imminent, I wondered if you might use it as a reason to leave with them. I think it meant a lot to Tokimi that you didn’t… you don’t spend as much time with her as you could, really.”

“That is true.” Washu admitted. “Perhaps I should be less harsh on you, in light of that. You are, after all, assuming responsibility for my sister’s life and her care. I suppose I shouldn’t criticise, if I’m not willing to take her back to the Earth and look after her there.”

“Tokimi is always welcome with us, you know that.” Seiryo said with a smile. “She is an honorary member of the Tennan family, and I would be much grieved if you chose to take her from us now.”

“You look rather the worse for wear yourself, actually.”

Washu eyed Seiryo critically. “Your hair was soaking when you boarded the ship… is that just from the rain, or…?”

“No, I decided it would be nice to take a little swim.” Seiryo said ruefully, touching his still damp locks absently as he did so. “But thanks to Tokimi’s quick-thinking, and Kiyone’s First Aid training, I’m none the worse for my adventure.”

“You went…?” Washu stared.

“He fell off a bridge and whacked himself unconscious playing the hero.” Kiyone said frankly, a pinkish tint touching her cheeks at Seiryo’s casual mention of her actions. “One of Yuzuha’s men came after him and he tried to fight the man off on a soaking wet bridge, wearing completely inappropriate footwear for such an encounter. Luckily I had come back to see what was taking them so long and I was able to wing the man in the shoulder with my blaster, but Seiryo still insisted on taking a cold dip, knocking himself out on the way down.”

“You…?” Seiryo blinked, staring at his friend, and Kiyone grinned, shrugging her shoulders.

“Basic training, level three.” She said lightly. “Protect your allies at all costs.”

“I didn’t realise.” Seiryo returned her grin with one of his own. “I knew he fell back, but I didn’t perceive your shot.”

“Well, you were too busy going swimming.” Kiyone said frankly. “Fortunately for you, Tokimi dove in after you, and pulled you out. She swam against the current really strongly, Washu — I never realised she was so powerful as that.”

“Tokimi is Kii, and she’s not an invalid now.” Washu reflected. “She always was a good swimmer, and the rapids and swirls of the water on Kihaku were no gentle ripples. I’m not surprised she was able to fight through it. That wasn’t the smartest thing you’ve ever done, though, Seiryo. Not only did you drag my sister into danger, you made her save your life, too?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Seiryo rubbed his chin. “I really didn’t think this through as well as I thought I did. Still, you are all safe now. And that has to count for something. We’ve left that godforsaken rock far behind us, and all is well.”

“Is it?” Washu frowned, her gaze flitting across the deck to where

the nobleman sat, Tokimi still clinging to him tightly. “Is she asleep?”

“More or less.” Seiryo nodded, stroking his fingers gently through the drowsy Kii’s thick dark hair. “And I take your point. The long term impact on Tokimi… I don’t know. I never intended to make her remember all those things. To see her so upset… I didn’t like it. I said I’d make it my business to protect her, when she came into my custody. And now I’ve broken my word.”

“I don’t know.” Washu looked thoughtful, perching herself on a nearby unit as she contemplated. “In some ways, it might be better that it’s all come out now, rather than being thrust at her at some later time. She is re-learning, little by little. She’s more cognisant now of what’s going on around her, even if sometimes her language skills let her down. Let’s not forget she is living in a foreign land and speaking a tongue she only remembers in piecemeal bits from the scattered memories still lingering in her brain. She’s not like me in that — she hasn’t worked around Galactic Tongue for years like I have. But she’s not… she’s not stupid. She’s hurt, and yes, she is impaired. But she understands a lot of things. And as time goes on, and she re-learns about the world, such memories are bound to have a deeper impact. Now, maybe, she can deal with them and consign them to her past before they hurt her too badly.”

“Do you think so?” Seiryo looked surprised, glancing down at his charge as he did so. “That because she is impaired, it won’t have such a deep impact on her?”

“How well Tokimi understands what she’s been through, I’m not sure.” Washu admitted. “Obviously she knows that bad things happened, and that she was involved.”

“She said something about being eaten up by the World… I didn’t wholly understand it.” Seiryo frowned. “Something about being pushed deep inside herself… I don’t know what she meant exactly.”

“Tokimi is far more spiritual than I have ever been.” Washu shrugged. “And she had such total faith in the World and the culture of Kihaku. Perhaps she’s accepted that it was the World’s will that she do those things, and that because of that, it really wasn’t her fault. The thing that’s troubled her isn’t that — the impacts and implications are likely too complicated for her to reason out. What concerns Tokimi most is the way you and Suki and the people she cares about will view her. Especially you, Seiryo. She loves you more than she loves anyone — maybe even more than she does me. And she knows, now, what she made you do. That’s why she’s been so upset. Because she doesn’t want you to hate her.”

“Because of me?” Seiryo stared. “She did say she wanted to stay with Suki and I, but even so, Washu…”

Washu gestured to her sister, shrugging her shoulders.

“Look at her right now.” She murmured. “She’s exhausted, and she should be in bed. But she doesn’t want to leave you. Doesn’t that tell you how important you’ve become? Family isn’t blood in Tokimi’s world. She was the last of her tribe, so everyone she’s ever grown up calling family formed a bond with her through closeness, not biology. Now she’s adopted you as the elder brother she never had. The bond Kihaku’s magic created between you both is strong, and I think the both of you have made it stronger. Yes, Seiryo, I think that has been Tokimi’s overwhelming concern… that you might not want her any more, because of all of those things she made you do.”

“Well, in that case, I hope I put her mind at rest when I told her that Suki and I wanted her with us on Jurai.” Seiryo said quietly. “And that the past doesn’t matter — that I don’t blame her for any of it.”

Kiyone eyed him keenly.

“You sound positively soft when you talk about her. Like you’re her father, or something.” She said bluntly. “Even though she’s milennia older than you are.”

“Her father?” Seiryo snorted. “No. A brother figure, maybe. But not her father.”

“Her guardian, however.” Washu’s eyes twinkled. “Who knows? Maybe Kiyone’s right. Tokimi was very close to our Father, you know, and she’s lacked that person in her life for a long time. And perhaps you do have a paternal air about you, when you deal with my kid sister. Maybe it’s a sign, Seiryo. You’re growing ever closer to thirty — maybe you should speak to Suki about finding you a good wife.”

“*Washu*!” Seiryo’s eyes widened, and Washu laughed, enjoying her friend’s stunned expression. She nodded, spreading her hands carelessly.

“Well, you should consider it.” She said flippantly. “After all, your estate has to pass to someone when you die, and if you will go throwing yourself off bridges — there’s no guarantee that Tokimi or Kiyone will be there to save you, the next time around.”

“If anything happens to me, the estate goes to Suki.” Seiryo recovered himself, smiling calmly. “And she is more likely to marry than I am, given that I am such a solitary, arrogant jerk of a creature.”

He cast Kiyone a sidelong glance at this, and Kiyone reddened, indignation in her blue eyes.

“Stop para-phrasing me.” She instructed. “I might have said you were arrogant and I did call you a moron and an idiot. But I don’t remember saying you were solitary. You reached that insult all on your own.”

“I think she was worried about you, Seiryo.” Washu’s eyes twinkled with humour.

“Well, he’s the only one who can properly fly this stupid crate.” Kiyone said flatly. “Washu, stop trying to get a rise out of each of us, okay? Just because the whole ordeal is over with now, it’s not funny.”

“Fine, I’m sorry.” Washu held up her hands in mock-surrender.

“I’m going to go make sure Mihoshi hasn’t eaten all of the ship’s supply of food.” Kiyone said decidedly. “I’ll leave you to your family babble — I’m still on duty, if you hadn’t forgotten.”

With that she was gone, and Washu raised an eyebrow, offering the nobleman an interested look.

“Well, Seiryo, she’s awfully familiar with the layout of your ship.” She said innocently. “Considering that this is the first time she’s flown in it.”

Seiryo laughed, shaking his head ruefully.

“You never do miss a beat.” He remarked. “But it’s all above board. At least, it’s nothing to get excited over. I’ve been giving Kiyone some coaching, that’s all. She and I have met up a few times on the Unko to go over certain Elite principles. Even though she’s made up her mind not to abandon Mihoshi-san, she still has ambition to improve herself. And my skills go to waste, if I don’t pass them on. That’s all.”

“I see.” Washu looked thoughtful. “Well, I imagine Kiyone is a very adept student.”

“She is.” Seiryo acknowledged. “But then I didn’t expect any less from her. Even before our unfortunate encounter on the Yagami, I knew her name by reputation. It’s not often that a regular officer is so discussed among the Elite… but many of my fellow agents thought that it was only a matter of time before Kiyone made the step up. Now I know why she hasn’t done so — it’s not for any lack of drive or talent.”

“But out of affection for her friend.” Washu smiled. “Which in a way is an even better indication of Kiyone’s calibre. If she takes

something on, she takes it on wholesale. And Mihoshi's crises — that's one person's job at any time. I have to admit, fond as I am of Mihoshi, I couldn't have the endurance to deal with it constantly. Yet Kiyone has, and does. And even, I think, relishes it these days. They are almost like sisters, even dysfunctional ones."

"Yes, I think so too." Seiryo agreed. "I have liked coming to know Detective Kuramitsu better. I had such respect for her father, and she is a quite unique kind of Detective."

"She has a good heart."

"She does." Seiryo confirmed. He paused, glancing at the now sound asleep Kii in his arms, then smiled. "Just like this one."

"I am angry with you, about what you've done bringing her to Rikishouki." Washu confessed. "But I'm also… I'm also glad that you did. Kiyone might have had a point, talking about her hidden strengths. That my sister has become more to you than just something you take care of — that you sought to rely on her experience and her knowledge to get you through. Tokimi was always gentle, when we were children. But she wasn't stupid. She had a lot of strengths and talents. And I would dearly like her life now to become more than it has been so far. Sometimes she surprises me with what she can do. Diving in after you was dangerous, but she did it without thinking. And Seiryo, that she did that… that was a shred of the old Tokimi coming through. The total belief in helping one she cared for, regardless of the risk to herself. That she grows stronger… it makes me happy to see."

"Me too." Seiryo ran his fingers through the brown hair again, then, "I really am sorry, Washu. It was too much, too soon. And I won't ask her to leave Jurai again. If she doesn't want to go, she won't go. After all, she's made her home there now. And I don't want to shatter all of her hopes and trust by dragging her into danger all the time."

"I'm glad about that." Washu said acidly.

"Visiting that place made me a little more curious about your world." Seiryo admitted. "And the lives you and Tokimi led, so long ago."

"In what respect?"

"Tokimi sometimes tries to share her culture with us, and I confess, we don't always understand." Seiryo pursed his lips. "She has such a preoccupation with flowers and plants — with nature in general. And she is so superstitious — but I'm learning that those things are legacies

from Kihaku. That if your planet was anything like as wild and beautiful as Rikishouki, it must have been a paradise indeed. And my ancestor helped to destroy it — for that I am sorry."

He smiled, looking sheepish.

"For so many years I held the superior Juraian view that colonies were annexed for their own benefit." He added. "And my family has always taught that Senichi Tennan was a great explorer, an Emperor's right hand man, the epitome of Tennan pride. Now, however, I've seen the true cost of what he did. He acted in Jurai's name, and for that I cannot fault him. He was, after all, following his King's will. But then again…"

"A lot of bad things happen. It's just the way life is." Washu shrugged her shoulders. "Planets get invaded. People get killed. It's how the universe works. It's not right or fair, I agree. But the message I've tried to leave with Mayuka and the others is that the past is the past. The future is the thing that can be changed. And that they don't have to be afraid. The Jurai that exists now is not the same Jurai that your ancestor Senichi came from. Azusa has never sought to colonise new worlds, and I don't believe Ayeka would, either."

"I think you're right." Seiryo inclined his head slightly. "But that the actions of my people put both you and Tokimi through so much…"

"Well." Washu sighed, shaking her head. "I don't think I did either of us any favours, either."

"You should let go of the past too, then. And move on."

"I have." Washu smiled. "That's why I didn't stay on Rikishouki. The time to be Priestess has gone… long gone. I'm a different sort of woman now, and I belong on the Earth with my daughter and that household. Who knows? I may yet be a grandmother, if the future repeats itself. I don't want to miss out on the chance of belonging to a proper family."

"A Grandmother?" Seiryo raised an eyebrow, and Washu laughed.

"Yes, I find it hard to envisage at present, too." She admitted ruefully. "But you never know. All is possible, even with my daughter."

She spread her hands.

"Tokimi's floral expertise is inbred into her, you know." She added. "She was an Inoue, after all."

“Meaning what, exactly? That she has some kind of, well, magic over flowers?” Seiryo looked startled. Washu shook her head.

“No. Tokimi’s only native magic is Kii sight.” She replied. “That isn’t what I meant. But my father once told us both the story of the Inoue tribe, when we were small. Tokimi can’t have been more than about six — she wanted to know where she came from, and so he sat both of us down and he told us a story about a tribe of people whose livelihoods were entirely based around the cultivation of herbs and flowers. The Inoue were the apothecaries and healers of Kihaku — they knew the names of every single plant and how to use it in remedies of all kinds. And of course, with their floral expertise, it was the Inoue who would create the offerings that my father would burn, each seperate plant conveying a different message to the World.”

“I see.” Seiryo bit his lip. “But Tokimi never learnt those arts. How does she know so much?”

“I think it has something to do with her empathy for life.” Washu said pensively. “She has always had incredible empathy, Seiryo. When Father died, she could feel the World’s pain — she felt it where I, the blood heiress could not. She considers each living thing of equal importance and she respects their life forces. I think she just… well, I think she has a natural feel of what helps people. She is more perceptive to emotion than I am. Other people’s and her own. I think that’s part of being an Inoue Kii. She certainly wasn’t taught it by my Father.”

“Then it is sad she is the last of her race.” Seiryo said softly. “If they were such good people, it seems a shame they should die out.”

“There was a terrible harvest one year, and most of the Inoue crops died.” Washu murmured. “The lack of food caused fighting and many people were killed. Tokimi’s parents were afraid for her safety. She was a newborn in a world of starvation and strife. Eventually, despairing and half starved herself, Tokimi’s mother brought her child to Father’s house and entrusted her to his care. I never saw her, or even knew her name. But Father said he could not refuse the request. That a mother would give up her child in order to provide her with safety… he was touched. Shortly after, the last of the Inoue villages fell victim to fire, and the remaining survivors perished. Tokimi was the only Inoue to remain… and Father hoped that, as she grew, she would learn and master the techniques her people were so famed for. In a sense, she did. She didn’t disappoint him like I did.”

“Isn’t that like what you did with Ryoko, Washu? Didn’t you leave her in someone else’s care for her own benefit?” Seiryo asked quietly.

Washu flushed, shaking her head.

“I sent her away to be trained as an assassin. I don’t think my motives were as noble as Tokimi’s poor mother.” She said frankly. “I really don’t know much more about the Inoue than that. Only what Father told us on that day. Tokimi absorbed it, and from then she strove to learn all she could about herbs and plants so that she could help to heal the sick. She never mentioned it again. She was my sister, and Father’s daughter. But maybe she thought of it. I don’t know. I don’t think I could ask her, now. I’m not sure she’d remember.”

“Kihaku’s explosion scarred her beyond your healing abilities, didn’t it?” Seiryo asked frankly. Washu shrugged.

“I don’t know.” She admitted. “I don’t find scarring, exactly, when I try and help her heal. I think it was something else, on reflection. What you said about Tokimi’s own account made me think on this, and I’m sure I know what she was trying to say. I think that, little by little, Kihaku’s tortured spirit destroyed the real Tokimi. Bit by bit it ate away at her strength and her will until all that was left was a shell through which it could act. In a sense, it killed who she was.”

“But Tokimi is alive!”

“I know.” Washu nodded. “And when we were on Kihaku, Tsunami and Tokimi touched minds for a brief instant. I think, in that moment, Tsunami made a connection with Tokimi and re-awoke her spirit somehow. I don’t pretend to know how, only that Tokimi feels an affinity with Sasami because of it. She says herself that Tsunami helped her — she obviously remembers it. And if her other memories are fleeting, clouded and confused, well, maybe that’s because they’re not her true memories. They’re things that happened to her body but not her soul, whilst she was under Kihaku’s control.”

“And you just helped her to reassemble the bits of her Tsunami brought back to life?”

“Yes. That’s what I think.” Washu nodded. “And they’re still re-assembling, little by little, into the Tokimi we have now.”

“That means, if you’re right, that Tokimi will never be fully healed, doesn’t it?” Seiryo eyed his charge in consternation. “That no matter how hard she tries, she never will be that Tokimi again.”

“I think you’re probably correct.” Washu agreed. “But even so, Seiryo, it’s better than the fate Kihaku mapped out for her. She’s happy and safe, most of the time. She’s surrounded by people she loves and in whom she has faith. And she still, clearly, has things to

offer the world. Don't underestimate her because of her impairment. I think she may still surprise us all."

"Yes, perhaps that's so." Seiryo owned. "It's just a damn shame to me. I learnt a harsh lesson, but I am fit and well now. Tokimi, on the other hand…"

"Tokimi is part of your lesson." Washu said simply. 'I don't say she suffered for you, or anything stupid like that.' As Seiryo opened his mouth to protest. "That would be an arrogant assumption to make, and it would imply Tokimi had no purpose in life herself. But she has played a part in your recovery, Seiryo. By that I don't mean your physical healing. I mean your… your awakening to who you are able to be. She's helped to bring this you to the fore. You always cared for Suki — but Tokimi requires even more patience and affection than your sister, in some ways. So even in her current state, she has done good. Don't feel bad for her situation. Be glad instead that you've crossed her path. Hurt or not, my sister has always been one to leave an impression."

She smiled at his expression.

"Well, you can't pretend you don't understand my meaning." She said softly. "You're too smart for that. Seiryo, can you honestly tell me that, before your experiences with Kii magic, you would have even cared if a young Kii girl's brain was permanently injured or not?"

Seiryo was silent for a moment, contemplating.

"You imply that I had absolutely no feeling for other people, before I crossed paths with Tokimi." He said frankly.

"For those outside of your family, perhaps." Washu spread her hands. "And outside of your social strata? Were such people worth your notice, then?"

Seiryo started, then looked rueful, shaking his head.

"I suppose I cannot deny it." He acknowledged slowly. "These days the standing of the Tennan family matters more to me if I have earnt it. I was born into an influential, old Juraian family, and that in itself brings honour. But I have ceased to expect that to be enough. High-born or not, I earn my position through my work for Lady Sasami and my attention to Council matters. You are right, Washu. I have become a different person in many respects. And I suppose Tokimi is the thing which effected that change."

"Not just Tokimi — don't do yourself down." Washu grinned. "I don't see a different man when I look at you now than I did that day

we first faced one another in Jurai's Imperial Chamber. You are still strong, ambitious, stubborn, determined, proud. All those things are part of who you are, and they always have been. The difference is simply that you've learnt to moderate them with other parts of your nature that you kept suppressed. That's all. You have ceased to be only your father's son — now you are your mother's, as well."

"You do know, I hope, how much I hate being psychoanalysed." Seiryo said frankly. Washu laughed.

"Yes, I know." She agreed unrepentantly. "But I still find it interesting. Don't you?"

"I'm not sure." Seiryo rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "But I take it as a compliment, if you liken me to Mother."

"And so you should." Washu said softly. "Weak and fragile she may be, but Lady Kaede has a good and loving heart. And it is nice to see such emotions shine forth from her son as well as from her daughter. I know that you probably feel like sometimes your feelings cloud your rational judgement, but then, that's something we all have to deal with from time to time. What I've learnt, from trying to shut myself away, is that you can protect yourself but you cannot properly live. Being hurt, taking chances and making mistakes, these are parts of living. Tokimi has no fear of those things. And I think it's a lesson she's begun to teach you."

"Between Tokimi and Suki I might actually make a decent human being, is that what you are saying?" Seiryo's eyes twinkled with humour, and Washu laughed.

"Perhaps." She bantered back. "Although what I said before still stands. Perhaps it would do you good to take a wife, Seiryo… I don't think the bachelor life would suit you, in the long run. Take it from someone who has been alone far too long — the novelty does fade."

She shrugged, her expression becoming serious as an image of Mikamo flitted into her mind.

"I would give a good deal to be able to go back and take the chances I never took then." She said gently. "You're still young, and you can still take those chances. So don't be afraid to take them, all right?"

Seiryo's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"You're speaking in tongues, but I almost think you're trying to guide my thoughts somewhere." He said accusingly. "What is the meaning of it, Washu? Why are you so keen all of a sudden for me to

take a wife?”

“Well, Tokimi might benefit from a mother figure, and Suki will have to choose her own life path, sooner or later.” Washu said flippantly. She grinned, the moment of gravity gone, and Seiryo sighed.

“You aren’t going to be serious with me, are you?” He remarked resignedly. “This is another of your games.”

“Perhaps.” Washu shrugged her shoulders again. “Just bear it in mind, all right?”

“I don’t seek an unhappy, class-arranged match such as that suffered by my parents, you know.”

“And I didn’t mean that you should.” Washu settled herself more comfortably. “Seiryo, I think Tokimi is stirring — you’re obviously talking far too loudly.”

“Tokimi?” Seiryo frowned, his retort forgotten as he felt the drowsy girl stir in his arms. “Are you awake now?”

“Nii-chan?” Tokimi raised a blurry gaze to his, offering him a faint smile. “What is happening?”

“You fell asleep on me, but now you’ve stirred, maybe you should go and take a proper nap — you’re obviously tired, and if you stay here you’ll be stiff.”

“Go… and nap?” Tokimi’s eyes became wide, and she shook her head. “No! Want to stay with Nii-chan! Want to stay!”

“Listen, Tokimi, Seiryo is tired too you know.” Washu said gently. “He needs rest as well. Do as he says, all right? Come with me and we’ll get you into bed.”

Tokimi hesitated, glancing from her sister to the nobleman doubtfully, and Seiryo grinned.

“I promise that I won’t have gone anywhere, when you wake up.” He assured her. “We’re travelling still, in any case. But I’m not going to abandon you, Tokimi, or let anything bad happen to you again. So go with Washu, all right?”

Tokimi sighed, but slowly she nodded her head.

“You promise?” She echoed. Seiryo nodded.

“I promise.” He agreed solemnly.

“Then Tokimi will go with Washu-oneechan.” Tokimi murmured.

She yawned. “I am tired. It has been… a long trip.”

“Yes, it has.” Washu agreed gently. “But it’s almost all over now, and you’ll soon be back home on Jurai with Suki and Sasami and everyone else. So come with me, imoto-chan. After all, you want to be fresh and rested to greet them all, now don’t you?”

Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

Well, so it was back to business as usual.

With a slight smile, Washu pushed open the door of her laboratory, pausing to survey the familiar surroundings with a contented smile. From the far corner of the chamber, something stirred in the shadows, letting out an exclamation of surprise and Washu turned, holding out her hands to greet her assistant with a warm, welcoming grin.

“Yume.” She said softly. “Did you miss me? Or have you rewired my whole laboratory in my absence?”

“I’ve been worried about you, of course.” Yume said reproachfully. “I didn’t know what was going on until Tenchi and Ryoko got back the day before yesterday — and then you still weren’t with them. You went back to Jurai — is Tokimi all right now? She must be, or you wouldn’t have come back here already. Would you?”

“Tokimi has her family now and I have mine, though sisters we’ll always be.” Washu shrugged her shoulders, settling herself in her work chair as she glanced around her. “It seems uncommonly tidy in here, you know. Don’t tell me you were working off nervous energy by tidying everything up, Yume? This domesticity of yours is getting disturbingly dominant in your personality — you might want to take a look at that.”

“It was a distraction.” Yume admitted, looking sheepish. “But really, I didn’t have anything else much to do. Cooking food for Noboyuki-san and Katsuhito-dono doesn’t take much time or RAM, and in any case, Katsuhito-dono has been at the shrine mostly. It’s very boring when the rest of you aren’t here, you know. I didn’t realise how much I liked being part of a noisy family — you aren’t all going to go away again any time soon, are you?”

“Not planning it, but you never know.” Washu said cheerfully. “I suppose between my trip to Airai to see Najya and my unforseen detour on Rikishouki, I’ve been away almost a month in Earth time, haven’t I? I’m sorry, Yume — time does fly when you’re cavorting across space. But I think I’ve neglected my studies long enough. I had hoped to do some work on the Arian mineral that that young noble’s sword was made of, but I’ve found a more pressing specimen for

investigation."

She brushed her finger against her wrist, slipping off the bracelet and holding it up to the artificial light of the lab.

"This is made from Kii stone." She added. "Fragments of the planet's core. I never did totally understand my planet, you know, and I might never, even now. But I'd like to try, anyhow. See if science can be applied to the World I grew up on. Fancy helping me? I'm sure there'll be a lot to do."

Yume stared at her for a moment, then she smiled, nodding her head as she held out her hand to take the proffered bracelet. Momentarily she glanced at it, then she set it down on the unit.

"You wish to analyse something so beautiful?" She murmured. "Are you sure about that?"

"Well, I'm not certain I'm going to carve bits off it." Washu admitted. "More because it was given to me by someone I forged a bond with on Rikishouki, and I know that it meant something to her when she gave it to me. It's one of a pair, Yume, and it would be a shame to damage it any. But even so, there's a lot we can do to learn about it."

She reached into the pocket of her uniform, retrieving the chip that Ryoko had given her before the battle with Yuzuha.

"And for any other experimentations, I brought another sample." She added matter-of-factly. "So don't worry too much about vandalism, Yume. I've covered all eventualities."

"Then I guess that's what we'll do, first thing in the morning." Yume's eyes twinkled with amusement. "I'll be sure to have everything ready — it's good to have you back, Washu."

"It's good to be back." Washu stretched her arms over her head. "And yes, tomorrow we'll get back to work. I think perhaps I spent a little too long roaming the wild, however — I'm restless and I'm going to go walk off my space lag in the trees around the shrine. Tonight I feel like looking at moon and stars, for some reason. No doubt I'll shake it out of me — but I guess a part of me liked being back in such an open, natural environment."

She grinned at her companion, offering her a playful wink.

"Till tomorrow, then." She said. "Don't worry! I promise not to leave the planet again in the next twenty four hours! Much as the universe fascinates me, this rock is my home now."

With that she blurred out of view, re-materialising in front of the old Masaki shrine gateway as she surveyed the darkening Earth landscape with a slight sigh.

“Earth is beautiful, and unplanned, somehow.” She murmured. “Unregulated, created by unseen hands… not aesthetic, not designed, yet perfect all the same. Maybe I was drawn to this place because in that respect it has something in common with my homeworld. I shut myself away — I always have… but when I was a child, Tokimi and I roamed wild around the hills and valleys near our village as much as we liked. We swam and climbed trees and spent so much time out of doors. My curiosity for all things has not always been confined to the mechanical — it’s easy to forget that, with all the recent work I’ve done. But originally, it was life I wanted to learn about. And in that respect, I still have so very much to learn, don’t I? Science really is an open, endless book — and all the time in the world can’t fill it with answers.”

“You seem pensive.”

A voice made her glance up and she grinned ruefully, making out her daughter’s form atop the gateway. Ryoko stretched out on her stomach, resting her chin in her hands as she gazed down at the scientist with a pensive look. She kicked her legs idly, then scrambled into a sitting position, indicating the wood beside her.

“Coming up?” She asked flippantly, and Washu hesitated for a moment, then nodded, hazing out of view and re-materialising on the end of the beam.

“With pleasure.” She said easily, settling down on the smooth, weather worn wood and casting her companion a smile. “What brings you out here so late, little Ryoko? Are you hoping to spend the night under the stars, or is Tenchi so concerned about his missed classes that he’s locked you out of his room so he can study?”

“A little bit of both.” Ryoko said sheepishly. “But it’s all right. I actually wanted to speak to you… at least, I figure maybe you’re the only one who knows the answer.”

“To what?” Washu looked startled, and Ryoko drew her knees up to her chest, gazing up at the constellations that glittered overhead. At length she pursed her lips.

“That rock on your bracelet was from Kihaku, right?” She asked quietly. “And the rock found… the one I gave you… that was too, yes?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I thought… well, Kihaku… was some weird screwed up ghost God creature, wasn’t it?” Ryoko frowned. “Some spirit that possessed Tokimi, and made her abduct Tenchi and do all those things?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“So explain to me then, how it was that you were able to use that magic on Rikishouki, if Kihaku is dead?” Ryoko demanded. “And why could I speak Kii to that Mayuka girl, when I’ve never learnt the language or even cared much about it? For a split second I could almost read your thoughts, Washu — and everything she said to me made sense. I’ve never felt that kind of bond with you before, and it scared me a little bit. I thought Kihaku was gone — is it?”

“Yes and no.” Washu frowned. “The planet is dead. The spirit — the Eagle… to be honest with you, Ryoko, I don’t fully understand what the Eagle is or how it was manifested in my ancestors when the time called for it. Perhaps it has something to do with belief, as much as it does the spiritual bonding to the World… what I do know is that I was stronger in all my magic when I wore Mayuka’s bracelets. Strong enough to withstand all of Yuzuha’s attempts to destroy me. I’ve got a lot of studying to do to learn about the mineral compound that Jurai so sought to mine for their own fuel needs. At the very least the rock still carries strong mystical radiation — to affect you and I both so much, it must be the case. But how much, or what causes it, I don’t know.”

She eyed her daughter thoughtfully for a moment, then,

“You read my mind?”

“I don’t know.” Ryoko admitted. “Sort of, I think. I knew where you were, and that you had Tenchi’s sword. I knew exactly how to find you. But it wasn’t like my bond with Ryo Ohki. It was just like, when I had the rock and you had those bracelets round your wrists, we were connected through that. Does that make sense? It seems a bit nuts, but it’s all I could think of.”

“I think you’re probably right.” Washu nodded. “After all, you’re half Kii and I’m Kii, and we’re both of the same tribal origin. It wouldn’t be impossible for the rock to affect you, because you have my blood. Hakubi blood, Ryoko… the World would have called to you as well.”

She smiled.

“Your name is Hakubi-no-Ryouko, you know.” She said playfully.

“Your name translates in so many tongues and so many ways, my girl, but it’s original meaning — its *true* origin — was Kii in the first instance. You were my devil caller, from the start — it’s ironic that people came to call you a demon during your pirate days when you consider that fact, isn’t it? And I suppose it’s only natural that you should have some connection to that heritage, even after so much estrangement.”

“My name is Ryoko Hakubi, and in any case, it will soon be Ryoko *Masaki*.” Ryoko said flatly. “I’m not into all that tribal hoodoo stuff.”

Washu laughed, shrugging her shoulders.

“Nonetheless, it might prove valuable to learn more about the magic, now you’ve seen what it can do.” She said softly. “Think about it, okay? If you want to know, I’m happy to teach you — but only if you want it. Not otherwise.”

“I’ll think about it.” Ryoko frowned. “I guess in that respect, maybe it wouldn’t hurt to have some idea.”

“I knew you were a wise girl at heart, musume.” Washu grinned. “With the strength you already have, I’m sure you’d have no trouble adding a few less usual spells to your unique arsenal.”

“So the Kii in me is why the rock glittered when I touched it, but not when Tenchi did.” Ryoko leant back on her hands, contemplating. “That makes sense. Sort of.”

For a moment they sat in silence, then,

“Ryoko, I’m glad you and Tenchi did come to find me.” Washu said softly. Ryoko started, then offered her mother a rueful smile.

“I was worried about you.” She admitted. “Though if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll probably deny it. It’s crazy, but I meant what I said on that stupid planet. We’d come to take you back with us, and I was all ready to fight you on it, if you’d decided you wanted to stay with them.”

“I don’t belong there.” Washu said with a shrug. “But it took you coming to find me to really prove that to me.”

She bit her lip, then,

“You know, in all my life, noone has really done that for me.” She said evenly. “I mean, I’ve been around a long time. But since the day I broke Tokimi’s faith in me — since the day I betrayed my world and took refuge aboard a Juraian ship to escape my world, denying my background and concealing my heritage, noone has ever really come

through hell and high water to find me. Most people whose paths I crossed suffered for it — many of my old friends are dead, and I can't help feeling in many cases that's because of their association with me. But you… you and Tenchi — you seem to live a charmed life between you. And no matter what, you always come. I suppose then I knew that no matter what, you were my family and Earth was my home. Once and for all, I knew it beyond all doubt."

"You're getting dangerously close to confiding in me, you know." Ryoko said archly, and Washu laughed, reaching over to grasp her daughter's hand loosely in hers.

"I know." She admitted. "But it's true all the same. It meant a lot to me, that's all. We've overcome a lot of things, and I'm gratified by the bond it's forged between us. More, I'm glad you and Tenchi want me here. I know I imposed on you in the beginning — but if you came all that way to find me, you must want me to stay here. Right?"

Ryoko pursed her lips, eying her mother cautiously for a moment. Then she relented, shrugging her shoulders.

"I had a mother for the first time when you came to live here." She said thoughtfully. "And I only realised I wanted one of those after I'd heard Tenchi talk so much about Achika. You're not like Achika, and we'll never be like they were. But still, I'm okay with it. You and I both belong on the Earth now, and that's just how it is, I suppose."

"And when you and Tenchi marry, I'll get to convey my maternal charms on him, also." Washu said mischievously. "I expect equal experimentation rights on him as well as you after that adventure's over, so keep it in mind. And I'm putting word in now for time to examine the grandchildren, if only to ensure they're not a threat to universal stability."

"Hey, woah there." Ryoko's eyes opened wide with alarm and she held up her hands. "Who said anything about grandchildren?"

"Well, there's always a chance." Washu shrugged her shoulders carelessly. "If the future repeats itself."

"Nozomi?" Ryoko looked doubtful. "Come on, Washu… you said yourself that time was always changing. She might not even exist, and if she does, she might be some total other person completely. I haven't any plans for parenthood, and nor does Tenchi — we've got a lot too much fun to have without worrying about babies."

"I guess time will tell." Washu reflected. "Either way, I wouldn't miss your wedding for the world, musume-chan. Knowing the way

you and Tenchi live your everyday life, I have a feeling it'll be an occasion that noone will easily forget!"

"I'm sure you're glad to be back on Jurai."

Seiryo leant up against the doorframe of his companion's bedchamber, offering her a grin as Tokimi turned from the window, sending him a dazzling smile. "Even after our adventures, I'm glad you still see this place as home, Tokimi. I know that the history between it and Kihaku hasn't always been good, and that you remember more now than you did before. But even so, I think it's good to have you stay. That after everything, a Kii can find a happy life on Jurai, despite the fighting between our planets in the past."

"Tokimi will stay." Tokimi nodded her head, hurrying across to fling her arms around her companion, hugging him tightly. "Tokimi belongs with Nii-chan and Suki, after all. Tokimi lives on Jurai now. The World is gone."

"Yes." Seiryo held her at arm's length, taking in her appearance carefully as he did so. Something new flickered in those sapphire eyes, no longer quite so carefree or innocent, and he frowned, shaking his head.

"We won't ever lie to you like that again, Tokimi. I promise." He said contritely. "We didn't want to hurt you, but still… much as you smile, I know we have. I don't want you to think you can't trust in Suki and I… if you're afraid, I don't want you to run away and think we don't care. Nothing is going to make us want to lose you, so you can always come to either one of us. We're your family now, after all. Just like Washu is."

"It's all right." Tokimi smiled again, and the gravity was gone from her eyes in a moment. "Tokimi trusts Nii-chan. Tokimi trusts Suki. It's all all right now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." Tokimi pursed her lips. "Nii-chan, Washu spoke to me before she left Jurai. She talked a lot about Kihaku, and Father, and the World. How the World was, what happened to it. She told Tokimi everything… and I know that she did kill Kihaku. But… but it was because the World wanted her to. She did it for the World and… and she did it to get Tokimi back. To make Tokimi free again, and able to live with Nii-chan and Suki on Jurai. So… so I'm not upset. The World wanted it that way… and Tokimi is happy now. Tokimi isn't alone any more. But… I am still sorry, Nii-chan. I'm really sorry for everything I

did.”

“You don’t have to be.” Seiryo assured her. “Because I already told you it wasn’t all your fault. Or really, any of it. Kihaku’s magic was strong, and if Washu’s explained that to you, you’ll know I’m right. And I thought we agreed that we’re both moving forwards, now. Not back. Kihaku is gone and so is the dark magic. You and I, we’re both free of it. Free to live our own lives.”

“Yes.” Tokimi seemed to be digesting this. Then she nodded her head.

“The World did want to die.” She admitted. “The Settlers caused it so much pain, that it wanted death more than life. And… and that’s why, Nii-chan. Tokimi was Priestess. Tokimi shouldn’t have been Priestess, but she was and the World was upset. But when Father died, Tokimi was upset too. Tokimi didn’t know what to do. Washu left her alone… Tokimi tried to help the World get better, but Tokimi wasn’t a Hakubi. So Tokimi failed.”

“Your World used you to bring about its own aims.” Seiryo murmured. “And its revenge on Tsunami because of the way Jurai’s people hurt it, in the past.”

“Yes. I think so.” Tokimi agreed pensively. “Maybe the World was a bad thing after all.”

“Or just wounded and desperate.” Seiryo sank down onto Tokimi’s bed, and after a moment, his companion slipped down beside him. “I know how the magic made me feel, Tokimi. I can only imagine what it did to you. I’ve seen men driven to despair, and those men act in desperate ways. I don’t think your World was bad, exactly. But everything has a weakness.”

“Even Nii-chan.” Tokimi interjected absently, and Seiryo started, then laughed.

“Nii-chan has plenty of weaknesses.” He admitted ruefully. “He just prefers not to show them if he can at all help it.”

“Mm.” Tokimi glanced at her hands, and for a moment she was silent. Then,

“Nii-chan tried to kill Kiyo-neesan once.”

“Yes. That’s true.”

“Because of me?”

“Because of Kihaku’s magic. Not because of you.”

“Yes.” Tokimi was quiet once more then, “Nii-chan, Kiyo-neesan has forgiven you, hasn’t she?”

“I hope so.” Seiryo rubbed his chin ruefully. “It seems so to me.”

“I like Kiyone.” Tokimi observed softly. “She’s kind. And smart. Like Washu-neechan is.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say she’s exactly like Washu.” Seiryo said, amused. “Your sister is in a class of her own, Tokimi.”

“Perhaps.” Tokimi owned. She turned towards him, offering him a warm smile.

“You like Kiyone, Nii-chan?”

“Yes, you know I do.” Seiryo looked surprised. “As you said, she’s forgiven the past — and we’re friends. I’m glad of that.”

“No…” Tokimi shook her head. She smiled again, lifting her hand and glancing at it, before pressing it gently against Seiryo’s chest.

“Here.” She murmured. “You like her *here*.”

Seiryo started, staring at her in confused disbelief, and Tokimi’s smile widened. She nodded her head, as if satisfied by what she saw.

“Nii-chan likes Kiyo-neesan here.” She repeated, patting his chest again as she spread her fingers over his beating heart. “I’m glad.”

“Tokimi…” Seiryo gathered his wits, gently removing her hand from his body as he slowly shook her head. “You’re getting mixed up again. Kiyone is my friend. That’s all. We’re good friends, yes. But that’s all it is. Like I’m friends with Lady Sasami, or with Washu. That’s all.”

“No.” Tokimi shook her head decidedly. “Not like Washu. Not like Sasami.”

“Then what?” Seiryo demanded. Tokimi pursed her lips, gazing at him thoughtfully for a moment. Then she dimpled.

“Like Ryoko-san and Tenchi-san.” She said triumphantly.

“Like…?”

“Ryoko-san glows when Tenchi-san is near.” Tokimi said with a careless shrug of her shoulders. “And when he thinks of Ryoko, Tenchi-san is warm inside. Seiryo-niichan is like this with Kiyo-neesan. He feels warm. Glows. And now she’s gone, Nii-chan is sad. He hopes to see her again.”

"*Tokimi!*" Horror flooded Seiryo's expression and he got to his feet, taking a step away from his charge in his dismay. Tokimi looked startled, sending him a look of bewilderment.

"What's wrong?" She asked. "Did Tokimi do something bad?"

"No… no." Seiryo drew a deep breath into his lungs, fighting to calm his shattered composure. As Tokimi's words echoed through him again he bit his lip, half-wondering at how much truth lay in the girl's innocent observations.

"I just don't think you've got it quite right." He hazarded. Tokimi beamed at him, shaking her head.

"Have you told anyone else this? Kiyone? Have you told her?"

"No." Tokimi looked surprised. "Should I? Should Tokimi have told Kiyo-neesan about it, too?"

"No!" Seiryo's eyes flickered with alarm and he shook his head. "No, Tokimi, you shouldn't talk to her about it — or to anyone. You're getting muddled and you don't know what you're saying. You've been through a lot and…"

"Nii-chan loves Kiyo-neesan." Tokimi interrupted him, coming to stand beside him and placing a finger on his lips. "I know. I can see. Tokimi isn't confused. *Nii-chan* is."

Seiryo sent his companion a troubled look, seeing the faint flicker of intelligence sparkling in the depths of her blue eyes, and he sighed, sinking back down onto the bed.

"And if you *were* right, what then?" He asked softly. "There's nothing I can do about it. Tokimi, Kihaku's magic is what binds us together as friends, not anything more than that. Even if I did think — or you think — there's something else, it's not possible and besides, I can't even think that way when I have so much else to do. I am not my father's son. I don't take mistresses and I don't shame women I respect. I am a Lord of Jurai — I have responsibilities. And so does she, Tokimi. She has her work at the Galaxy Police, and there's no way that anything else but friendship could exist between us. Not to mention the fact that I tried to kill her, once. Even if she has forgiven me — there's no way she could ever be expected to accept me in any other light than she already has. So please, I don't want to have this conversation again. And… and you must promise me not to talk to anyone else about it, either. Not even Suki, and especially not Kiyone. Do you understand?"

"Yes." Tokimi's eyes clouded, and she nodded her head. "I'm sorry,

Nii-chan. I made you upset.”

“No, not upset.” At the penitent expression on her face, Seiryo felt his heart clench with guilt and he shook his head hurriedly, squeezing her hand. “You only say what you see, after all, and if that’s what you see, well, I’ll just have to find a way of dealing with it. That’s all.”

“Dealing with it?”

“Yes.” Seiryo agreed. “So we’ll say no more about it, all right? Whatever it is… we won’t talk about it any more.”

Tokimi eyed him long and hard for a moment, then she sighed, nodding her head.

“I promise.” She said reluctantly. “But Nii-chan… you don’t have to be so sad.”

“I’m not sad. I have a lot to be happy about, you know.”

“Yes… but Nii-chan is alone. Like Tokimi was on Kihaku.” Tokimi said simply. “And it makes him sad. That’s all.”

“Perhaps it does.” Seiryo admitted ruefully. “Although until you brought it up, I’d not really thought of it in those terms. I’m hardly on my own, after all. I have you and Suki, and Lady Sasami, and everything here on Jurai. I wouldn’t say I was lonely, exactly. I think you’re worrying about me far too much.”

“But Tokimi loves Nii-chan. Nii-chan is kin to Tokimi now.” Tokimi said seriously. “And I want to help Nii-chan, when he feels sad.”

“I know you do.” Seiryo sighed resignedly, slipping an arm around the girl’s shoulders and hugging her tightly. “And the best way you can do that right now is to forget we ever had this conversation. All right?”

“All right.” Tokimi frowned, nodding her head. “Then Tokimi will go pick flowers. The ones in the Hall are dying, and I like living flowers. Not dead ones.”

“You do that.” Seiryo nodded, getting to his feet. “And I must walk up to the Palace and report to Lady Sasami, so we both have errands to run. I’ll see you later, Tokimi. Don’t spend too much time dwelling on Kihaku’s demise, will you? You have a new life here on Jurai now, and we’re very glad to have you.”

With that he pushed back the door of the chamber, heading out of the room and down the hallway towards the winding stairwell that led to the front entrance. As he did so, Tokimi’s words swirled around his

head and he frowned, clenching his fists as he fought to put them in their rightful place.

“My will is no match for Tokimi’s Kii sight.” He muttered. “But… how right is she? Or am *I* correct? The Kii magic did create a bond between Kiyone and I, just as it did between Tokimi and I. It would be foolish to consider it anything else. Tokimi is still impaired, after all — even if she is better than she was, she is still simplistic and she does not understand everything. And yet…”

He sighed, pausing at the foot of the stairs as he assessed the conversation once more.

“Yet she seems to know how people are feeling without them telling her.” He acknowledged reluctantly.

He bit his lip, leaning up against the wall as Washu’s own cryptic hints about marriage flickered across his memory.

“Dammit, is *that* what she meant?” He wondered aloud. “Is that what she was trying to tell me… is this so clear it’s blazing from me enough for anyone with Kii sight to pick up? And if so… is it something *Kiyone* could pick up on, too?”

He swallowed hard, shaking his head.

“But we are bonded by our experiences. That could be all it is.” He repeated. “Tokimi is impaired, and Washu likes to tease. There’s no reason to get ruffled. And yet… Tokimi’s innocence… it’s as if her Kii sight is empathic. Washu sees people’s true natures, but she’s not so guilelessly honest about what she sees as her sister. But Tokimi is less mischievous than Washu. She’s less tainted by the world around her. Perhaps this gives her the ability to see beyond people’s expressions to their hearts beneath.”

He rubbed his temples, unsettled by the direction in which his thoughts were heading.

“In which case, she might speak true for me, as well.” He muttered. “And if so… if so…”

He sighed, shaking his head.

“If so, I’m in trouble.” He admitted grimly. “And I have to find a way to fight it off, before it gets beyond my control!”